

A Qualitative Study of the Perceived Relevance of Social Media Platforms in Friendship Formation for Post Primary Students

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Declaration

The author hereby declares that this thesis is entirely his/her own work. No element of the work described in this dissertation has been previously submitted for any degree in University of Limerick, or in any other institution.

Signature _____

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Table of Contents

Declaration.....	i
Acknowledgement.....	ii
Table of Contents	iii
List of Appendices	vii
Glossary	viii
Abstract	ix
Chapter 1: Introduction	1
1.0 Introduction	1
1.1 Context and Justification for the Research Study	1
1.2 Researcher’s Position in the Study	2
1.3 Aims and Objectives	2
1.4 Methodology	3
1.5 Outline of the Research Study	3
Chapter 2: Literature Review	5
2.0 Introduction	5
2.1 Adolescent Development	5
2.1.1 Physical and Emotional Development	6
2.1.2 Personality Development	6
2.1.3 Relationship Development	8
2.2 Social Media Use Amongst Adolescents	9
2.2.1 Benefits Associated with Social Media Usage	9

2.2.2 Risks Associated with Social Media Usage	10
2.3 The Effect of Social Media on the Self-Esteem of Adolescents	12
2.3.1 Defining Self-Esteem in Relation to Online Activity	13
2.3.2 Positive Effect of Social Media on Self-Esteem	13
2.3.3 Negative Effect of Social Media on Self-Esteem	14
2.4 Guidance Counselling Provision in Post Primary Schools	15
2.4.1 Policy on Guidance in Secondary Education	15
2.4.2 Whole School Approach to Guidance	16
2.4.3 The Role of the Guidance Counsellor in Second Level Education.....	17
2.5 Summary and Conclusion	18
 Chapter 3: Methodology	19
3.0 Introduction	19
3.1 Identification of Research Questions	19
3.1.1 Primary and Secondary Research Questions.....	19
3.2 Research Methodology	20
3.2.1 Research Paradigm: Interpretivism	20
3.3 Methods of Data Collection and Analysis	22
3.3.1 Access and Sampling	22
3.3.2 Focus Groups with Students	23
3.3.3 Data Analysis Method	25
3.4 Validity and Reliability	26
3.5 Reflexivity.....	27
3.6 Ethical Issues in Research Study	28

3.7 Conclusion	29
Chapter 4: Findings	30
4.0 Introduction	30
4.1 Participant Profile	30
4.2 Overarching Themes	30
4.2.1 The Nature of Friendships: online versus offline	30
4.2.2 The Need to Feel Constantly Connected	32
4.2.3 The Perceived Impact of Social Media on Self-Esteem	34
4.2.4 The Effect of Social Media on Students' School Life	36
4.3 Summary of Findings	39
4.4 Conclusion	40
Chapter 5: Discussion	41
5.0 Introduction	41
5.1 Research Questions of Study	41
5.2 Communicative Value of Social Media Platforms	41
5.2.1. Educational Value of Social Media Platforms	42
5.2.2 Online and Offline Communication	43
5.3 Impact of Social Media Platforms on Adolescent Friendship Formation	44
5.3.1 Positive Impact	44
5.3.2 Negative Aspects of Social Media Communication	45
5.4 Perceived Effect of Social Media Usage on the Lives of Adolescent	47
5.4.1 Developmental Impact of being Constantly Connected	47

5.4.2 School Supports Available for Students	48
5.5 Conclusion	50
Chapter 6: Conclusion	51
6.0 Introduction	51
6.1 Overview of the Findings	51
6.2 Strengths and Limitations of the Research Study	52
6.2.1 Strengths	53
6.2.2 Limitations	53
6.3 Recommendations	53
6.4 Reflexivity and Personal Learning	55
6.5 Conclusion	56
References	57
Appendices	71

List of Appendices

Appendix A: Subject Information Letter – Principal	71
Appendix B: Subject Information Letter – Research Participant	73
Appendix C: Subject Information Letter – Parent/Carer/Guardian	75
Appendix D: Consent Form – Principal	77
Appendix E: Consent Form – Research Participant (Focus Group)	78
Appendix F: Consent Form – Parent/Carer/ Guardian	79
Appendix G: Confidentiality Agreement for Focus Group Participants..	80
Appendix H: Child Protection Form	81
Appendix I: Focus Group Guide	82

Glossary of Terms

ACCS	Association of Community and Comprehensive Schools
CPD	Continuous Professional Development
DES	Department of Education and Skills
ELGPN	European Lifelong Guidance Policy Network
FG1	Focus Group 1
FG2	Focus Group 2
IGC	Institute of Guidance Counsellors
NCGE	National Centre for Guidance in Education
NCCA	National Council for Curriculum and Assessment
OECD	Organisation for Economic Co-operation and Development

Abstract

The overall aim of this qualitative study is to explore the perceived relevance of social media platforms on the friendships of adolescents. In particular, the study focuses on the lived experiences of a sample of post primary students and their perceptions of the relevance of social media in their everyday lives.

There has been much research conducted to date on the merits and shortcomings of social media and the effect it has on the lives of adolescents (Alzahrani and Bach 2014; Boyd and Ellison 2008; Kennedy and Lynch 2016; Lynch 2014; Van Dijck 2013; Velten and Arif 2016). The current research in this area predominantly represents the opinions of developmental psychologists and guidance counsellors. When the views of adolescents are considered the research tends towards the positive attributes and the dangers associated with the ever-changing face of the smart phones.

The researcher considered there to be a gap for such a study that portrays the voice of the adolescent and their opinion on how social media platforms influence their friendships. During their time in post-primary education adolescents experience developmental stages for which they require certain supports including that of the guidance counselling services. The use of social media platforms is continuously increasing, therefore making the subject matter very pertinent. Further study of the effect it has on our adolescent students allows for a deeper understanding and therefore allows provision of appropriate guidance for them.

This study employed an interpretive paradigm using focus groups to gather information. It obtained the perceptions of 19 adolescent post-primary school students and their experience of friendship formation throughout their adolescence. In order to interpret the collected data the researcher utilised a thematic approach to identify, analyse and uncover thematic patterns within (Braun & Clarke 2006).

The findings identify that social media platforms often serve to strengthen friendship formations. However, the findings also highlight how adolescents experience pressure to be constantly connected, this purportedly has implications for students both in their homes and at school. It also impacts on the school environment as issues which arise online often spill over into school life which has connotations for the available resources within a school. To conclude several recommendations are put forward to inform policy, practice and further research.

Chapter 1: Introduction

1.0 Introduction

This chapter will outline the research topic that is within the context of relevant theory, policy and practice. It will present the context and justification for undertaking the study as well as highlighting the aim, objectives and methodology. Finally, the plan of the dissertation will be presented.

1.1 Context and Justification for the Research Study

This research study is an exploration into the perceived relevance of social media platforms on friendship formation in adolescents. With 95% of adolescents having access to a smartphone (Anderson and Jiang 2018) the phenomena of social media usage is growing exponentially (McGarrity 2019). As adolescents spend the majority of their time in a school environment, their experiences there influence every aspect of adolescent development, “ranging from the breadth and depth of their intellectual capital to their psychological well-being to the nature of peer influences on their development” (Eccles and Roeser 2011 p.231). This study will consider the difficulties adolescents face as they navigate friendships through online and offline interactions. It will deliberate on the relevance of social media use on the psychological development of adolescents and contemplate its impact from an educational perspective. The role of the guidance counselling service will also be considered within the context of the study.

It is in adolescence that identity and independence are established, however for adolescents growing up in today’s digital world the environment for these constructs is fundamentally different. Adolescents are “growing up native to social media. This volume of social relationships is unprecedented” (Weiss *et al.* 2018, p.10). The study considers how the everyday lives of adolescents have become so dependent on their smart phones and therefore on social media use. Overconsumption of social media leaves adolescents open to a myriad of behaviour risks (Schurgin O’Keeffe *et al.* 2011), this study will gather the viewpoints of adolescents on such challenges and risks.

In recent years the responsibility of personal and social guidance has become a shared responsibility in post primary schools with management being encouraged to

develop a whole school approach. This integrated approach to guidance includes management, teachers, pupils, parents, non-teaching staff and the wider community (DES 2012; Hearne and Galvin 2014). The Department of Education and Skills (DES, 2013) identify the guidance counsellor as a prominent figure in the support structure for promoting positive mental health within the school system. As the prevalence of smart phones increases, there is an awareness of the positive attributes of their use but also the difficulties that accompany this for adolescents. Therefore, adolescents may wish to avail of support from their guidance counsellor to discuss any issues that may arise. This study will also investigate the perspectives of students on whether they consider access to a guidance counsellor to be of help to them in such situations.

1.2 Researcher's Position in the Study

Thomas (2017) and Cohen *et al.* (2011) observe the importance of the researcher stating their positionality at the outset of the research. The positionality of the researcher is significant in the context of this research study. She is presently a subject teacher and trainee guidance counsellor in the post primary system. The motivation for this study has been to inform the researcher's practice as a future guidance counsellor in the context of how to support students overall development. In addition, this study will consider the influence of social media platforms on the lives of these adolescents.

It was imperative that the researcher demonstrated a reflexive process to ensure validity of the research (Bryman 2012; Thomas 2017) and this will be addressed in the upcoming chapters.

1.3 Aims and Objectives

The primary aim of this research study was to explore post primary student's perceptions of the relevance of social media platforms on the formation of friendships in adolescence.

The objectives were;

1. To review the existing literature relating to adolescent development, social media use amongst adolescents, and policy and practice of guidance counselling relating to the study.
2. To examine the perceived benefits and negative aspects of social media platforms for friendship formation as informed by the adolescent participants.
3. To explore the impact that social media platforms may have on adolescents regarding their secondary school experiences.
4. To critically analyse the findings to identify recommendations for future policy, practice and research.

1.4 Methodology

The researcher used an interpretivist paradigm in this study in order to gain insights into adolescent perspectives of the relevance of social media platforms on how they form friendships. This was considered the most suitable approach as it favours an individual's personal interpretation of their experiences and expression of how they perceive the world (Cohen *et al.* 2017; Robson & McCartan 2016).

In order to gather the necessary data focus groups were conducted with Junior and Senior Cycle students. The focus group data was transcribed by the researcher who then used a thematic analysis strategy (Braun and Clarke 2006) to examine the primary data. The researcher was also cognisant of maintaining ethical practice and guidelines as outlined by the University Limerick and Institute of Guidance Counsellors (2012).

1.5 Outline of the Research Study

Chapter 1: The introduction aims to present the context and the justification for carrying out the research. It sets out the researcher's position in view of the study, considers the aim and objectives and describes the methodology used. It also provides an overview of each chapter.

Chapter 2: The literature review provides a critical evaluation of existing literature pertaining to this topic. It considers theoretical perspectives on adolescent development, social media use amongst adolescents and the provision of guidance counselling in post primary schools.

Chapter 3: This chapter outlines the methodology and research design underpinning the study. It presents a rationale for the chosen research paradigm and the primary and secondary research questions. It addresses the method of data collection employed and the analysis process. Issues such as reliability, validity, ethics and reflexivity are also discussed.

Chapter 4: The findings chapter serves to present the research findings of the primary data and addresses these under appropriate themes.

Chapter 5: This chapter will provide a discussion on the findings in relation to the existing literature.

Chapter 6: The final chapter concludes the research study with a summary of the main findings. It will outline several recommendations for future policy and research pertaining to adolescents' use of social media platforms. It concludes with an outline of personal learning that the researcher experienced.

Chapter 2: Literature Review

2.0 Introduction

Bloomberg and Volpe (2016) state that the purpose of a literature review is to offer a succinct and balanced representation of the current information and concepts relevant to the proposed study. Although the concept of relationship building in adolescence through social media is in its relative infancy, due to the fast pace at which the internet is progressing there is a myriad of information available. This literature review is intended to critically analyse a range of material pertaining to this topic and offer an insight into the existing knowledge and identify any gaps in relation to the aim of this study.

The strategy used in this review identified key terms embedded within the title. An extensive array of relevant resources was generated from primary texts, online journals and research reports. The literature was gathered and categorised appropriately by the reliability of the source and its relevance to this study (Dudovskiy 2018).

This literature review is structured under the following thematic areas:

- Adolescent development
- Social media use amongst adolescents
- The effect of social media on the self-esteem of adolescents
- Guidance Counselling Provision in Post Primary Schools

2.1 Adolescent Development

Adolescence is a period of rapid transition a time of self- discovery, broadening horizons and emerging independence as well as encompassing physical, mental, social and emotional growth (Garcia and Santiago 2017; Gutman and Midgley 2000). As an individual is developing from a child into an adult the physical and psychological changes occurring simultaneously tend to be challenging. This section will address the literature on physical, emotional, personality and relationship development.

2.1.1 Physical and Emotional Development

According to Barry and Murphy (2014) from birth until the age of thirty the human brain is continuing to develop in an attempt to increase efficiency. They also state that between the ages of thirteen and nineteen the connections between neurons in the brain reduce if not exercised in order to increase efficiency in the area of the brain associated with how social behaviours are expressed appropriately. The connection between logical thought and emotion is weak in the adolescent brain as it is not fully developed and therefore behaviour at this stage can tend to be erratic, fluctuating between sheer excitement and conformity to indifference and contempt (Beaudoin 2014; Barry and Murphy 2014). This is relevant to the current research study as during this stage of development, adolescents' competency to evaluate complex situations alters and they are more inclined to take risks whilst they search for independence and attempt to impress peers (Giedd 2012; Stang and Story 2005).

2.1.2 Personality Development

Personality development is a key component of adolescent development and various theoretical perspectives have been proposed on this issue. When exploring the relevance of social media platforms on relationship formation in adolescence it is necessary to consider the assumptions and principles of such theories. Early on, Freud's psychosexual theory (1905) considered that personality develops in five different stages from birth to adolescence and emphasised the importance of personal experiences in the early years of development. Freud believed that 'to be normal during the adolescent period is to be itself abnormal' (Freud 1958, p.267). However, contemporary perspectives suggest that traditional views on adolescence may have been unduly restrictive (McCroy *et al.* 2016).

When considering cognitive development, Piaget (1896-1980) suggested that adolescents use formal operational thinking to fabricate an idyllic world, with their real-world experience proving inadequate by comparison. He referred to this as "naïve idealism" (Boyd and Bee 2015, p.305). However, Piaget's theory was criticised as it did not consider the importance of culture and social guidance. Subsequently the views of Vygotsky's (1896-1934) became more influential as he believed that one's social environment was significant to their development and educational achievement using concepts, including scaffolding, cognitive

apprenticeship and cooperative learning to achieve this (Rogoff 2003). Erikson's psychosocial theory (1950), acknowledged Freud's idea of physical changes but like Vygotsky, Erikson placed more weight on the various demands made by a changing social environment. Specifically, he proposed that between the ages of 13 and 18 adolescents may be faced with a struggle between identity and role confusion. What should transpire for the young adult at the end of this stage is a greater sense of self, realistic ideals of their future and sexual identity; however acceptance of these differing roles can cause confusion (Bee & Boyd 2007). Erikson believed that during this stage adolescents were primarily concerned with how others viewed them as opposed to who they believed they really were.

From an ecological perspective Bronfenbrenner (1979) has proposed that adolescent development is influenced by experiences from within the individual and their external environment (Bronfenbrenner 2005). He considered their development to be more comprehensive than just the individual and distinguished between environmental systems in relation to cultural, socio-economic, immediate contexts and the interconnections between these components (Sugarman 2001). Christensen (2010) agrees that Bronfenbrenner's theory has offered an insight into the factors that contribute to the growth and development of individuals, however he is critical that 'resilience is not a dimension that is included in Bronfenbrenner's model' (Christensen 2010, p.105) and indeed a trait that would influence adolescent behaviour on social media. In relation to this particular study, Aiken (2016) considers that adolescents who might present as socially awkward avoid expressing themselves to others but explore their identity through social media, which concurs with Erikson's proposal of 'role confusion'. This is also posited in recent research with Tamura *et al.* (2017) suggesting that adolescents are in crisis with the real self being substituted for a digital copy through excessive use of smart phones.

Conversely developmental theorist, Noam (1999) argues that early adolescence is characterised more by group cohesion rather than identity formation. This has auspicious connotations for later development, allowing older adolescents to move through different groups with confidence. This theory suggests that younger adolescents are more susceptible to peer pressure, whereas older adolescents "generally respond more readily to challenges to resist peer pressure for the sake of

forming their own unique sense of identity” (Hazen *et al.* 2008, p. 163). As this study includes both younger and older adolescents this idea is pertinent.

2.1.3 Relationship Development

During adolescent development, relationships with peers are perceived to be very important and friendships tend to develop more significance. Adolescents are inclined to alter their behaviours and attitudes in an attempt at conformity towards coveted friends, exhibiting behaviours which they anticipate will result in social popularity (Giletta *et al.* 2012; Güroglu *et al.* 2012). According to Hartup and Stevens (1997) relationships between peers tend to change as individuals develop and these life transitions bare significance to the quality and similarities of friendships. With regards to social media usage, Ahn (2012) contends that online norms such as frequent communication and self-disclosure will naturally materialise in building relationships and as relationships develop so too will one’s social capital. In a study of Irish teenage girls experiences and understanding of online friendships, conflict and bullying, Ging and O’Higgins Norman (2016) found that “having a large number of friends was perceived as indicative of social status, and careful image management was seen as key to social approval” (p.807).

It is apparent that friendships are subjected to considerable change over time. As adolescents’ “capacity for complex social reasoning increases, young adolescents are able to make correspondingly complex differentiations between types of friendships” (Hardy *et al.* 2002, p. 119). An important consideration when carrying out an exploration into social network sites is posed by Pinker (2014); “at a time of life when friends mean everything to you, what does it mean to have 1700 of them?” (p.185). Turkle (2012) believes that we are becoming too familiar with being “alone together”, and states “human relationships are rich and they are messy and they are demanding. And we clean them up with technology and when we do we sacrifice conversation for mere connection” (6.47). This research study will look at whether adolescents perceive their friendships to be predominantly through face-to-face contact or edited in social media connections. In order to consider this objectively, an awareness of the use of social medial amongst adolescents is necessary and will be addressed in the next section.

2.2 Social Media Use Amongst Adolescents

Since the invention of the World Wide Web in 1989 its rise and reach has been phenomenal. According to the Central Statistics Office in 2019, 91% of households in Ireland have access to the internet by comparison to 72% in 2010. Young Social Innovators and Amarach Research (2019) questioned young people aged 16-21. The survey found that over a quarter of the young people surveyed spend four hours a day on their smart phone, with 20% using them for six or more hours. According to the same research 60% of young people said social media has positively impacted on their lives. In contrast a substantial proportion (28%) feel persistent peer pressure and scrutiny from social media contributes to making life more difficult. According to Alzahrani and Bach (2014) social media can contribute to personality development in four ways: (i) culture of popularity, (ii) unreal standards of appearance, (iii) approval seeking behaviour, and (iv) prevalence of depression and anxiety (p.111). These aspects will be addressed in relation to the risks and benefits associated with social media usage.

2.2.1 Benefits Associated with Social Media Usage

The primary focus of this study is on friendship formation through social media platforms and therefore it is pertinent to consider the perceived benefits of such platforms. Social media allows individuals to (i) create a profile including certain privacy restrictions, (ii) create a list of users with whom they wish to share their information with and (iii) view the information of the associates on their list and perhaps others (Boyd and Ellison 2008). Social media platforms such as Facebook, Twitter and Snapchat are changing the idea of identity, transforming our involvement in other people's lives, encouraging creativity and blurring the boundary between online and offline social participation (Kennedy and Lynch 2016; Lynch 2014; Van Dijck 2013; Velten and Arif 2016). Van Dijck (2013) highlights how these platforms are not finished products but in fact are forever changing in response to the needs of the user and the pressure to surpass other similar sites.

Social media allows individuals to develop a sense of identity, create greater connections with societies outside the traditional physical setting of the home and school and advance their communication skill set (Archer 2012; Hampton *et al.* 2011; Kennedy and Lynch 2016). Schurgin O'Keefe *et al.* (2011) indicate that

regular social media users interact more frequently with their peers and therefore are presented with more opportunities to engage in social skills, this may result in them feeling more socially competent. When adolescents engage with social media it serves to enhance existing social ties and contributes to their sense of community. Whilst engaging with social media is usually undertaken in isolation, it can prove sociable (Bengtsson 2016; Kennedy and Lynch 2016; Kraut *et al.* 2006; Mihailidis 2014). In addition to enhanced communication and social connection online sites such as Facebook and Snapchat act as a platform for sharing ideas, homework or group projects, increasing the availability of learning opportunities (Bloomfield Neira and Barber 2014; Schurigin O’Keefe *et al.* 2011; Valkenburg *et al.* 2006). Increasing one’s social capital in this way has a number of outcomes: gaining acceptance from peers, providing them with a sense of belonging, and increasing self-esteem whilst also impacting positively on adolescent mental health (Ahn 2012; Best *et al.* 2014; Dunne *et al.* 2010; Hampton *et al.* 2011; Schurigin O’Keefe *et al.* 2011 & Seo *et al.* 2014).

2.2.2 Risks Associated with Social Media Usage

Although social media has its advantages, according to the literature, there is also a range of negative aspects related to social media use. This section will address issues of cyberbullying, addiction and unsupervised contact with strangers all of which are relevant to this study as they influence the behaviour of adolescents on social media platforms.

Cyberbullying can be defined as repetitive, intentional behaviours resulting in an imbalance of power between the perpetrator and the target through the medium of electronic messages (Hinduja and Patchin 2009; Olweus 1993, 2012). Previous studies have suggested that victims of cyberbullying are susceptible to psychological health issues such as anxiety, depression, loneliness and low self-esteem (Callaghan *et al.* 2015; Menesini *et al.* 2009; O’ Moore & Kirkham 2001; Sweeting *et al.* 2006). With regard to the Irish context a number of large scale studies have been conducted on the issue of cyberbullying. In 2012, the first major survey undertaken in Ireland to assess the prevalence of cyber-bullying with a sample of 3004 adolescents produced stark results. One in five of these students reported as being involved either as the bully, the victim or in some cases both. In addition the victims rarely told an adult

and only 1% of those who witnessed cyber-bullying would tell an adult. The 2019 *My World Survey* gathered the views of 10,459 adolescents on their mental health and wellbeing. Nearly 39% of them reported that they had experienced bullying at some point, 73% acknowledged their experience occurred in school and 15% affirmed that bullying had occurred at home, online or by text (Dooley *et al.* 2019). Adolescents who experience bullying were more likely to report episodes of anxiety, distress and stress outside the normal range (Dooley & Fitzgerald 2012). There is a school of thought that online networks do not “engender teenage meanness. They simply transmit, without emotional checks of face-to-face contact, capacities that are already there” (Pinker 2014, p.189).

Addiction to social media has been defined as;

Being overly concerned about social media, driven by an uncontrollable motivation to log on to or use social media, and devoting so much time and effort to social media that it impairs other important life areas.

(Andreassen & Pallesen, 2014, p. 405)

Hawi and Samaha (2017) found that adolescents who reported high levels of social media addiction conveyed low levels of self-esteem and high dependency on social media. Furthermore, in a survey conducted by Studyclix.ie of more than 2,600 Irish secondary school students, Weckler (2017) reported that almost half of these adolescents described themselves as having an addiction to their mobile phones, with 91% of them depending on their phones for socialising through different social media platforms. The same survey relates that 54% use their phones in class without permission and one in ten of these adolescents have subscribed to the dating application, Tinder.

Overconsumption of social media leaves adolescents open to behaviour risks such as “bullying, clique-forming, sexting, Facebook depression, anxiety, severe isolation and self-destructive behaviours” (Schurgin O’Keeffe *et al.* 2011, p.801). According to Pinker (2014), social rejection is felt by teenage girls more acutely than others with the peak year being fifteen years old and ostracism is used to reduce group size which may lead to cyber-bullying if these tactics come into play through social media sites. “Young people can also be remarkably clannish, and cruel in their exclusion of all those who are different” (Marlowe and Canestrari 2006, p.115).

Contact through social media platforms tends to be in the form of faceless interaction, and often these interactions are with strangers. Kennedy (2010) reported that 71% of Irish teenagers have been contacted by strangers online, and 43% responded out of curiosity. This research found that 66% of the adolescents believed it to be safe to share personal information across social-networking sites, half of these granted any internet users permission to access their information. In 2017, Zeeko, an Irish organisation dedicated to raising awareness around internet safety, carried out research with over 2,000 students throughout Ireland. It found that 32% of first year secondary school students had interacted with strangers online, this increased to 70% among sixth year students. Also, 38% of sixth years admitted physically meeting a stranger from the internet. The same report found that Irish adolescents were more likely engage in sexting as they got older, for instance, 4% of first year students said they had sent a sext image, while 34% of sixth years had reportedly been involved in this. However, Everri 2017, (cited in Waymen 2018) suggests that such results should not be considered shocking as these statistics are in accordance with expectations from a biological, psychological and social perspective.

Along with carefree attitudes towards connections comes responsibilities as “one of the biggest threats to young people on social media sites is to their digital footprint and future reputations” (Schurgin O’Keefe *et al.* 2011, p.802). Adolescents must gain awareness around the appropriateness of the material they post and understand that once something is posted through the medium of social media it never truly disappears (Valkenburg *et al.*, 2017). Scanlan (2018) recognises how simple it can be to become enthralled in the excitement of sharing with friends through social media and urges adolescents to be cognisant of the fact that nothing is ever permanently deleted from cyberspace.

2.3 The Effect of Social Media on the Self-Esteem of Adolescents

Self-esteem plays a major role in adolescent development. It is pertinent to this study as the use of social media can affect self-esteem both positively and negatively,

serving to enhance or damage it. This section will aim to define self-esteem, outlining its influence, both positive and negative, in relation to social media use.

2.3.1 Defining Self-Esteem in relation to Online Activity

Self-esteem is defined as ‘an individual’s positive or negative evaluation of himself or herself’ (Smith *et al.* 2014, p. 107). Defining self-esteem considers two factors; one’s own worth and competence in achieving personal goals (Ironside *et al.* 2019). However, the relationship between these concepts highlights that self-esteem does not “occur in a vacuum but is tied to the value or quality of our action” (Mruk 2013, p.28).

Online platforms such as Snapchat can be attractive to teenagers as they allow for anonymity. Therefore the user can portray any idea of self they wish. This impacts the users’ self-esteem as they tend to show their best self and can attempt to conceal mediocrity or even the struggles they might be dealing with (Krämer & Winter 2008). As social media sites encourage feedback from peers, they are liable to have an effect on the self-esteem and psychological wellbeing of the individual. It was found that positive feedback enhances self-esteem whereas negative feedback and desertion by friends will serve to decreased self-esteem (Barker 2009; Thomaes *et al.* 2010 & Valkenburg *et al.* 2006;).

Self-esteem incorporates the idea of both “social self-efficacy” which refers to ones perceived competence to forge new relationships and “collective self-esteem” – related to how attached one feels to a particular social group (Seo *et al.* 2013). In an attempt to increase their self-worth, individuals with low self-esteem may use social media to disclose information they perceive might gain them recognition, as this invites both positive and negative comments the effect can also be two fold (Utz *et al.* 2012).

2.3.2 Positive Effect of Social Media on Self-Esteem

Social media sites have been recognised as a means for individuals to widen their network of friends and increase social relations whilst allowing exploration of self, and can heighten self-esteem especially for those with poor social skills (Bonetti *et al.* 2010 & Kowert *et al.* 2014).

A study carried out by Kim and Lee (2011) found that having a large number of friends on Facebook and being competent in providing support could lead to increased happiness and therefore, increased self-esteem. Gonzales and Hancock (2011) found that self-esteem could increase by perusing one's own Facebook profile. Previous studies also indicate that social media sites allow for experimentation in expression of self, anonymity together with on-line peer support proved to remove certain communication barriers allowing for increased self-disclosure resulting in positive feedback and therefore greater feelings of community and acceptance (Best *et al.* 2014; boyd 2008; Davis 2011; Ko & Kuo 2009 & Ledbetter *et al.* 2011). It is also suggested that "extraversion and openness to experiences were positively associated with social media use" (Seo *et al.* 2014, p.885).

2.3.3 Negative Effect of Social Media on Self-Esteem

Previous research has suggested that the use of social media sites can also have a negative effect on self-esteem. The non-face-to-face nature of social media can lead to users augmenting their self-image which can result in negatively impacting one's self-esteem (Chou & Edge 2012; Denti *et al.* 2012; Harman *et al.* 2005; Hawi and Samaha 2017; Valkenburg *et al.* 2006). When adolescents mask their own identity, they can become obsessed with the false self they have created, as opposed to learning to be comfortable in their own skin (Harman *et al.* 2005). Self-esteem can also be decreased when social media users compare themselves and their lives to others often believing others' lives are more exciting than theirs (Berry *et al.* 2018 & Hawi & Samaha 2017).

Furthermore, as social media platforms encourage feedback from users' online followers, studies indicate that when users receive negative feedback as opposed to positive affirmations their self-esteem can suffer (Burrow & Rainone 2017; Valkenburg *et al.* 2006 & Valkenburg *et al.* 2017). The tone of feedback received can also impact self-esteem negatively (Valkenburg *et al.* 2006). In addition, introverted adolescents have reported a decrease in well-being and self-esteem when using social media sites partly as it exacerbated feelings of loneliness (Kraut *et al.* 2002). Consequently, the guidance counsellor must be aware of the effects that social media use can have on the self-esteem of adolescents and be prepared to educate

them around the merits and disadvantages that can be associated with it. The next thematic section addresses the provision of guidance counselling in post primary schools.

2.4 Guidance Counselling Provision in Post Primary Schools

This section will address policy, theory and practice in relation of guidance counselling provision from a global, European and national perspective.

2.4.1 Policy on Guidance in Secondary Education

The international Organisation for Economic Co-operation and Development (OECD) proposes that career guidance services provide help to individuals to “understand the labour market and education systems, and to relate this to what they know about themselves” (2004, p.19). The expectation is not just to assist individuals but also to “serve public policy goals” (2004, p.18). The OECD proposes that this encourages lifelong learning, allows for occupational mobility of labourers and contributes to social equity goals. The European Lifelong Guidance Policy Network (ELGPN) defines guidance as:

A range of activities that enable citizens of any age, and at any point in their lives, to identify their capacities, competences and interests; to make meaningful educational, training and occupational decisions; and to manage their individual life paths in learning, work and other settings in which these capacities and competences are learned and/or used.

(ELGPN 2015, p.13)

In Ireland, the National Centre for Guidance in Education (NCGE) mirrors European policy, arguing that guidance in schools is “designed to assist students to make choices about their lives and to make transitions consequent on these choices” (NCGE 2004, p.12).

Guidance counselling has evolved greatly since its introduction in 1966, this is predominantly due to changes in education, society and economy (Hearne *et al.* 2016). Provision of guidance counselling in Ireland differs from that in other European countries. Whilst Ireland adopts an integrative approach of educational, career and personal guidance counselling, other countries may deliver these entities separately (Hearne *et al.* 2016; OECD 2004). The Education Act of 1998 stipulated the provision of “appropriate guidance” as a statutory requirement for all post-

primary students (Government of Ireland 1998). As there was no concise agreement on the definition of “appropriate guidance”, the Department of Education and Science (DES, 2005b) attempted to rectify this ambiguity by publishing guidelines emphasising that guidance counselling “encompasses three separate, but interlinked areas of personal and social development, educational guidance and career guidance” (DES, 2005b, p.4). Controversially, the 2012 Budget re-allocation of guidance in post-primary schools has subsequently had a negative impact on the delivery of guidance, predominantly one-to-one provision, (DES, 2012; Hearne and Galvin 2014; ICG 2016).

According to research carried out in an Irish post primary school in 2016 there was a consensus that provision of guidance was more heavily weighted towards senior cycle students (Hearne et al. 2017), even more so since the implementation of 2012 Budget when the allocation for guidance counsellors were no longer ex-quota. Although improvements have been made in an attempt to restore guidance counsellor posts in the 2016 and 2017 budgets (DES 2017), according to the results of an audit carried out by the Institute of Guidance Counsellors (IGC) in 2015/2016, from the total allocation of Guidance hours 67.5% of the work carried out by guidance counsellors was with senior cycle classes (IGC, 2016).

It is noteworthy that much of the allocated time spent with Senior Cycle students is given to subject and career choice and study skills, and therefore limiting the time guidance counsellors can give to issues such as self-harm, family concerns and bullying (Hayes and Morgan, 2011). Donnelly (2015) acknowledges this, whilst also pointing out that guidance counsellors do possess the expertise to assist students who present with emotional and psychological difficulties. However, there is now provision for guidance within the new Wellbeing curriculum in the Junior Cycle reform, with a suggestion of timetabling guidance as part of Wellbeing. This would benefit the students allowing them to become acquainted with the guidance counsellor and form a relationship with them if the need arose later for one-to-one support (National Council for Curriculum and Assessment [NCCA] 2017)

2.4.2 Whole School Approach to Guidance

Since 2005 the provision of guidance counselling has been viewed as a whole school responsibility and specifically emphasised since Budget 2012. This suggests a holistic approach to the delivery of guidance which incorporates personal and social development as well as educational guidance and career guidance (Hearne *et al.* 2017; Hearne and Galvin 2014; IGC 2008; NCGE 2017). Collaboration between school management, guidance counsellors, regular teachers and resource staff is essential in order to implement this approach with the views of students, their parents and other partners taken into consideration (DES 2005a, 2009, 2012; Hearne and Galvin 2014; Hearne *et al.* 2017). A key part of whole school guidance is developing a yearly Guidance Plan and to strike a balance between provision for both Junior and Senior cycle Students (DES 2005b). As the popularity of social media use increases, students should be educated to safely navigate this new dimension. It is important that this be a whole school approach.

2.4.3 The Role of the Guidance Counsellor in Second Level Education

In recent years the role of the guidance counsellor has become more complex in order to meet the needs of the student. According to the Institute of Guidance Counsellors the role of the guidance counsellor is to facilitate clients “through their lifespan in areas relating to personal, social, educational and vocational concerns” (IGC 2017, p.12). Guidance counsellors aim to instil independent thinking in students around their life choices (ACCS *et al.* 2012), and to encourage a sense of accomplishment in their educational endeavours (DES 2017).

The counselling aspect of this role is an integral component in the context of this study as the student should be allowed to explore their own thoughts and feelings, enhance their problem-solving skills and become confident in their decision making, whilst learning coping strategies which will prepare them for any personal or behavioural difficulties (Hearne *et al.* 2016; DES 2005a; Hayes and Morgan 2011; NCGE 2004). Irish guidance counsellors adopt a Rogerian person-centred approach with the core conditions of congruence, unconditional positive regard and empathy in a respectful and therapeutic relationship to encourage change in personality and behaviours (Kirschenbaum and Henderson 1990, Jones-Smith 2012). Therefore, access to the guidance counsellor when issues related to friendships and self-esteem

arise due to online activity is imperative to support the student through the emotional assessment of their self-worth (DES 2005a, 2005b).

2.5 Summary and Conclusion

The aim of this study is to explore the role of social media usage in the context of friendship formation during adolescence. From this literature review it is apparent that the use of social media is complex. As social media platforms are constantly evolving consideration must be given to their impact on adolescents' social and emotional lives. Guidance counselling is a specialist area which integrates the students' personal, educational and career needs (DES 2005a) therefore the importance of the guidance counsellor in supporting the student is paramount. However, it is not solely the role of the guidance counsellor, but rather a whole school approach that is necessary to deal with the vast amount of concerns that are arising with the increased use of social media. According to Health Ireland Framework (Department of Health 2013) wellbeing is the responsibility of everyone and should be supported at every level of society. The Wellbeing Guidelines suggest that students' wellbeing can be "enhanced when important aspects of wellbeing are the subject of teaching and learning in specific curriculum areas" (NCCA 2017, p.17). The literature review highlights that the problem is not with social media sites themselves but rather with the way in which they are used by students. The following chapter will outline the methodology used to carry out this study.

Chapter 3: Methodology

3.0 Introduction:

According to Bell (2005) the reason a researcher chooses a certain methodology is to “provide the data you require to produce a complete piece of research” (p.115). The aim of this chapter is to discuss the research methodology and methods used in this study. Issues of validity, reliability, ethics and reflexivity in the study will be addressed.

3.1 Identification of Research Questions

The formulation of the research questions was key as they align with the methodology used in the research. These questions arise from the aims and objectives of the research. Successful research questions can prove challenging in their design as the questions should aim to eke out relevant evidence which addresses the purpose of the research (Bryman 2012; Cohen et al. 2017). However, they also serve as the backbone of the research providing guidance for the researcher (Mertens 2015).

3.1.1 Primary and Secondary Research Questions

According to Robins *et al.* (2007) it is important to identify the primary question to be answered prior to undertaking the study of literature, as it will allow for improved decision making when gathering relevant information. The researcher must aim to strike a balance between the scope of the research questions as questions which are too broad or narrow have proven to cause difficulty. According to McLeod (2015, p.48) “it is necessary to arrive at a clear and final statement of your research question, it is the key point of contact with the research literature”. Slavin (2007) considers research to be an “organised and systematic inquiry that seeks to answer well-framed questions” (p.5). The popularity of social media platforms in the lives of adolescents triggered a curiosity in the researcher which resulted in the emergence of both a primary and secondary questions to assist in addressing the key issue.

After researching the relevant literature, the primary question that emerged was; “*What role do social media platforms play in friendship formation in adolescence?*”

Students appear to be so immersed in social media usage that it impacts on many aspects of their lives and secondary question were identified in order to address this area;

- 1. What communicative value do social media platforms have for post primary students?*
- 2. How do social media platforms influence positively or negatively on student friendships?*
- 3. What relevance does friendship formation through social media platforms have for supporting student's personal and social development?*
- 4. What is the perceived role of the guidance counsellor in a school settling when issues around social media usage arise?*

In order to address both the primary and secondary research questions in an effective manner, careful consideration was given to the choice of methodology to be used in this study.

3.2 Research Methodology

Richards and Morse (2013) deem the best research methodology to be the one which allows for consideration and use of the collected data in a manner which is best suited to the research goals. Qualitative research works on the premise of gaining insight into individuals' interpretations on how they view the world. It encompasses validity, credibility and trustworthiness (Bell 2005). This differs greatly from quantitative research which uses a more structured approach of statistical analysis and strives towards replication of resulting data (Bell 2005; Cohen et al. 2017; Hammersley 2013; Morrow 2005). Whilst quantitative research has its merits, a qualitative approach was deemed the most appropriate for this particular research study.

3.2.1 Research Paradigm: Interpretivism

Paradigms cannot be defined purely as methodologies, but as a means to allow for individual interpretation and understanding of the world around us, accepted on faith (Cohen *et al.* 2017; Guba & Lincoln 1994; Hammersley 2013; Kuhn 1970). In research a paradigm refers to "how we seek knowledge and how we use it" (Thomas

2009, p.73). Paradigms can further support research with the additional awareness of ontology and epistemology which will shape an individual's world view. According to Guba & Lincoln (1994) ontology refers to what you are looking at, what constitutes reality and the study of social constructs. Allison & Hobbs (2006) state that ontological consideration is about "What is the nature of the knowable, or what is the nature of reality?" (p.55). This is relevant in this study in order for the researcher to discern what the reality of forming friendships on social media is like and how does it work. Allison & Hobbs (2006) consider epistemology as; "What is the nature of the relationship between the knower (the inquirer) and the known (or knowledge)?" (p.55). In this study, the researcher ascertains the students' knowledge of the world around them and what they consider adequate understanding for social media when it comes to friendship formation. These concepts necessitate the researcher to think critically when considering their research question, whilst also contemplating the response they may receive (Bryman 2012; Crotty 1998; Thomas 2013).

Careful consideration was given to the different paradigm and method that could be used to obtain adequate information in relation to the research questions posed, and an interpretivist approach was considered more appropriate for this research rather than a positivist one. The quantitative/positivist methodology views human behaviours as an unchanging entity and tends to ignore the complexity of it (Cohen *et al.* 2017). Whereas a qualitative/interpretivist approach inclines towards an individual's personal interpretation of their experiences and expression of how they perceive the world (Cohen *et al.* 2017; Robson & McCartan 2016).

Interpretive research advocates that reality is socially constructed (Willis 2007). It emphasises the importance of understanding the individual and observing how they interpret the world around them (Bogdan & Biklen 1998). Therefore, it was envisaged that the knowledge the researcher gained in this study will provide insights and understanding of student behaviours in relation to social media usage in friendship formation. The researcher had to be prepared for these findings to be as diverse and multifaceted as the subjects of the research (Cohen *et al.* 2017). Nonetheless, Pring (2015) cautions about over simplifying a complex world, expressing that multiple realities exist. Therefore, in educational research, it is

important to be cognisant of how social constructs vary between social groups such as students.

A qualitative research format encourages the participant to speak openly, providing insight and ‘thick descriptions’ of personal experience (Geertz 1973; Bryman 2012; Thomas 2013). As qualitative research tends towards flexibility, allowing the participants to direct the flow somewhat and possibly altering the course of the research were more noteworthy issues to arise (Bryman 2012). This was relevant to this research study as the researcher encouraged the adolescent participants to speak freely therefore the course of the focus group delineated from the design occasionally.

Nonetheless, there are limitations to this interpretivist approach. The sample size of these studies is often quite small and therefore the resulting data is limited to this. Also, due to the nature of this type of research the material procured is subject to interpretation (Bell 2010; Cohen *et al.* 2017; Thomas 2013). It is imperative that the beliefs and values of the researcher do not influence the data that is being gathered. There is also a view that qualitative research cannot be replicated to produce similar results and is therefore subject to the researcher’s ingenuity and initiative (Bryman 2012; Sesay 2011). With regards to research pertaining to guidance counselling there is a propensity to look beyond the positive career narrative and focus more on “identity rather than personality, adaptability rather than maturity, intentionality rather than decidedness, stories rather than scores, and action rather than behaviour” (Savickas 2011, p.254).

3.3 Methods of Data Collection and Analysis

This section will describe how the researcher accessed the participants, why the chosen methods of data collection were used and the techniques utilised in the analysis of the data.

3.3.1 Access and Sampling

Following institutional ethical approval from the University of Limerick in spring of 2018, the researcher sought permission from the Gatekeeper, i.e. the Principal of the selected post-primary school, to embark on the research (Appendix A and D).

Following consent from the Gatekeeper, arrangements were made to distribute information sheets and consent forms to the parents and guardians of students who were deemed eligible for this research (Appendix C and F), to gain permission for student participation. Information sheets and consent forms were then distributed to a sample of Junior Cycle and Senior Cycle students to take part in two focus groups (Appendix B and E). Once the participants were selected, a suitable date and time to carry out the focus groups was decided upon. The participants were contacted 24 hours in advance of the focus group taking place as a reminder. On the day of the focus group, participants were reminded of the purpose of the research and asked to sign a confidentiality form at the start of the focus group.

The researcher chose purposeful sampling which involves choosing participants intentionally, based on her experience and knowledge of the issue under investigation (Braun & Clarke 2013; Cohen *et al.* 2007; Creswell 2012). Morgan (1998) suggests groupings of 6-10 participants for focus groups as one must strike a "balance between having enough people to generate discussion and not having so many that some feel crowded out" (p.71). The focus groups comprised of two groups of participants from each of the selected year groups (second and fourth year) who were randomly selected from candidates who have returned signed consent forms (see Appendix E and F). The first group had ten second year students who were of mixed gender, i.e. six females and four males. The second group had nine fourth year students, also of mixed gender, i.e. four females and five males. Both group interviews were audio-recorded lasting between 40 minutes and one hour.

3.3.2 Focus Groups with Students

The method of data collection in this study was focus groups with post primary students. Focus groups are considered beneficial when research wishes to cultivate information around individuals' views on a particular topic and how they formulate the views they possess (Krueger and Casey 2015). When planning a focus group, it is considered favourable for participants to share some characteristics or experiences (Creswell 2012). Whilst this should result in a richer wealth of information, it should also serve to instil confidence in the participants that they may not feel in a one-to-one setting (Bell 2005; Creswell 2012; Laws 2003; Robson 2007). Bowling (2014) suggests that the participants should be "carefully balanced in relation to age, sex

and ethnic status in order for the atmosphere to be permissive and relaxed” (p.411). Bell (2005) suggests that this promotes trust and familiarity among the contributors, which encourages an openness that enhances the credibility of the research. In this study, although this research technique had a structure, its flexible nature encouraged freedom for the students to contribute on important issues and allowed the facilitator to maintain a level of control (Bell 2005; Bloomberg and Volpe 2016). Throughout the research participants were encouraged to share their views on this topic without any pressure to reach consensus (Krueger and Casey 2009).

Focus groups can be either structured or non-structured, this depends largely on the aim of the research and on the level of involvement from the facilitator (Bell 2005). Best results tend to be yielded when participants are allowed free rein as information which the participants deem most important tends to be discussed (Richards & Morse 2013). However, the facilitator must be attentive otherwise the group can journey on a tangent, if not returned to the relevant topic the value of the focus group is diminished (Bell 2005).

Focus groups were considered the most suitable form of research for this study as they allow for flexibility within their setting (Creswell 2012). The researcher can adapt the strategy depending on the themes that arise. They incorporate conversational communication, both verbal and non-verbal between the researcher and the participants (Bell 2005). When designing the framework for the focus groups the researcher considered pre-existing literature and relevant issues pertaining to the primary research question were considered when formulating questions. The questions were open-ended in nature allowing for the emergence of additional information as the focus group progressed (Appendix I). This framework was adhered to throughout both focus groups

As with all methods there are limitations to the focus group method. These can include the propensity of a ‘groupthink’ mentality often led by dominant individuals (Bloomberg & Volpe 2016; Bryman 2012). During the initial stages of Focus Group 1 there were signs that this may have been an issue, but as the students became more relaxed the dominant voice became less central to the discussion. Furthermore, maturity levels of young participants can keep information at surface level

(Bloomberg & Volpe 2016; Krueger & Casey 2015), and this was an apparent distinction between the two focus groups, with Focus Group 2 generating richer data. Time constraint may also prove to be a limitation as it may hinder adequate participation from all contributors (Creswell 2012; Krueger & Casey 2015). This may have been a factor in Focus Group 2 as students seemed more confident in expressing their opinions providing more extensive responses, perhaps more time would have benefitted this group.

Focus groups provide a way of collecting data rapidly (Richards & Morse 2013) and whilst convenience was not the primary reason for choosing this method in this study. This method of gathering data facilitates small group interviews where the researcher aims to encourage participants to share their beliefs and attitudes on a particular topic (Krueger & Casey 2008, McLeod 2015). The participants are asked to respond to questions, “expressing similar or differing views” (Patten & Newhart 2018, p.164) and then discuss among the group. Facilitation of focus groups requires the facilitator to employ active listening and probing skills. It is their role to ensure that all students involved have a voice, that the students remains on topic and they can also probe for additional information where necessary (Krueger and Casey 2009, Patten & Newhart 2018).

3.3.3 Data Analysis Method

In this study the data analysis involves “making sense of the situation, noting patterns, themes, categories and regularities” (Cohen *et al.* 2011, p.183). Bell (2012) promotes the notion of the researcher transcribing their own findings as doing so will foster familiarity of the content and also endorse confidentiality. Krueger & Casey (2009) suggest that transcription of the material should be undertaken soon after the focus group has taken place allowing for reflection and connection to the material. The researcher followed these guidelines during analysis by transcribing the focus groups three days after they took place. The researcher used a colour scheme to highlight similar themes. This immersion in the data gave the researcher a greater sense of awareness around the material that transpired from the focus groups.

When analysing the resulting data, the researcher used the thematic data analysis framework proposed by Braun & Clarke (2006). Their six- stage qualitative

approach is not just a matter of stringing many different extracts together but should serve to identify common themes which can be analysed and used to support the points that the researcher is endeavouring to make. The phases in this approach are:

1. Familiarising yourself with your data
2. Generating initial codes
3. Searching for themes
4. Reviewing Themes
5. Defining and naming themes
6. Producing the report

(Braun & Clarke 2006, p. 87)

This first stage was carried out through the process of transcription, although time consuming is considered an “invaluable phase in data analysis” (Bird 2005, p. 227). The second stage involved coding the data to identify meaningful groups (Miles and Huberman 1994), the researcher carried this out manually, which allowed for reinforcement of phase 1. The third, fourth and fifth stages involved the mapping of initial themes once these were identified they were reviewed. Then by “define and refine” (Braun & Clarke 2006, p.92), the core of each theme was captured which allowed the researcher to identify the secondary research questions of the study. The final stage provides a “concise, coherent, logical, non-repetitive and interesting account of the story the data tells within and across themes” (Braun & Clarke 2006, p.93) through the production of a report. In this report (i.e. the findings in Chapter 4), in order to ensure validity of the research the researcher presented contradictions when evidence of the same arose (Creswell 2012).

3.4 Validity and Reliability

As quantitative research relies heavily on the scientific method as a means of gathering information, it is by its very design an approach than can be replicated “in all important respects by another researcher” (Patten & Newhart 2018, p.81) and therefore be considered more valid and reliable. Basit (2010) observes that when a qualitative approach is the chosen methodology validity and reliability can be perceived difficult to measure. However, there is consensus that when any research is carried out to a high standard, achieves what it aimed to achieve and has been evaluated critically it is deemed credible and dependable and, therefore, valid and

reliable (Basit 2010, Bell 2010, Johnson & Christensen 2000). Valid to the extent that it “measures what it is designed to measure and accurately performs its function” (Patten & Newhart 2018, p.123) and reliable in the sense that “the technique produces similar results in different situations or when administered by different people or at different times” (McLeod 2015, p.107). Krueger and Casey (2015) suggested that in order for their research to be considered valid they went to lengths to ensure that all participants had a voice and that the researcher listened intently and recorded accurately what was being said. If ambiguity arose they state that it is the researcher’s responsibility to request clarification. They make the suggestion that the researcher should summarise and regurgitate points for the participant in order to clarify that reporting from the focus group was accurate. The researcher has endeavoured to be conscious of both validity and reliability throughout this research, being mindful that the techniques used to collect data would not impede the findings in any way. The researcher then employed effective techniques to obtain and store data, to produce audio recordings and accurate transcriptions of data in order to improve validity (Cohen *et al.* 2011). To ensure reliability the researcher met with the research supervisor to further endorse that the focus group questions would yield the information required. Reliability looks for consensus between the recorded data and what actually occurs in the natural setting that is being researched” (Cohen *et al.* 2011). To assure validity, the framework for the focus groups was consistent throughout, with each participant being given an opportunity to answer each question, the researcher sought clarity on answers where necessary and ensured accurate understanding of replies throughout the focus groups (Hearne *et al.* 2016).

3.5 Reflexivity

Haverkamp (2005) refers to professional reflexivity as “a thoughtful examination of the parameters of one’s professional role, and its implications for ethical practice” (p.152). This term also permeates the world of research methodology, with the implication that researchers should aim to reflect on the impact of their approach, ideals, biases and decisions on the field they contribute to (Bryman 2017). It is often considered as a process of “a continual internal dialogue and critical self-evaluation of researcher’s positionality” (Berger 2015, p.220). McLeod (2010) suggests that reflexivity should be employed throughout the entire research process which would

require the researcher to critically evaluate methodology, data collection, analysis and interpretation.

The use of reflexivity was valuable for the researcher throughout this process. It allowed for awareness around predisposition that otherwise may have gone unnoticed, including a tendency towards presumption, preconceived notions and perhaps bias towards the students' reported experiences. Being cognisant of how personal experiences, thoughts and emotions could impact the process allowed for a more honest and trustworthy evaluation of the researcher's strengths and limitations as a researcher (Braun & Clarke 2013; Etherington 2004; Tracy 2010). The researcher was also mindful of bias when reporting the findings and endeavoured to report impartially (McLeod 2015).

3.6 Ethical Issues in Research Study

When carrying out any research ethical practice must be given due consideration. According to Braun & Clarke (2013) this pertains to "theory, codes and practices concerned with ensuring we do research in a moral and non-harmful manner" (p.330). To ensure best practice, ethical guidelines promote conscientious research practices which hold the wellbeing of the participants at its core. In this study, it was important that the researcher recognised the rights of the participant and preserved their dignity all the while gathering relevant and meaningful data in a competent and responsible manner (Hearne 2013; Suter 2006).

According to Cohen *et al.* (2011) ethical regulation involves three levels; legislative, professional and personal researcher implemented these levels within this study. In terms of professional conduct, ethical approval was granted by the faculty of Education and Health Sciences Research Ethics Committee in March 2018. Throughout the research a conscientious effort was made to adhere to the Codes of Ethics in place by professional bodies such as the National Centre for Guidance in Education (2008), the Institute of Guidance Counsellors (2012) and the Psychological Society of Ireland (2000). Adhering to these principles served to safeguard the integrity of the study.

On a personal level, there was an onus on the researcher to safeguard participants. One must always bear in mind that participant wellbeing is paramount in the pursuit of gaining original data and the researcher endeavoured not to exploit or manipulate the participants in any way (Creswell 2009; Hearne 2013). On the contrary, the researcher made every effort to build rapport and develop trust with the students. The researcher was aware that the needs of the participants might differ greatly from what the researcher perceived to be the needs of the research (Creswell 2009; Thomas 2009). Therefore, the researcher endeavoured to protect the participants providing reassurance surrounding confidentiality, by guaranteeing that the recordings and transcripts would be used only as intended. Their anonymity would be maintained both during the research and throughout the subsequent analysis using codes to protect their identity. The researcher sought to maintain balance between obtaining data that was worthwhile and meaningful, whilst simultaneously protecting the student's dignity and rights (Cohen *et al.* 2011).

The researcher was aware of the sensitive nature of the research, knowing that the participants shared information which may otherwise have been private and was, therefore, conscious to implement McLeod's (2010) five ethical principles of research; non-maleficence, beneficence, autonomy, fidelity and justice. The researcher had a duty of care towards the participants and was cognisant not to cause harm, "minimising the risk of psychological, emotional, professional and personal damage" (Hearne 2013, p.8), whilst at the same time "maximising the benefit to society" (Patten & Newhart 2018, p.35). All the involved students were treated fairly and were provided explicit information surrounding their right to withdraw from the research at any stage (Cohen *et al.* 2011; Hearne 2013, Patten & Newhart 2018, Thomas 2013).

3.7 Conclusion

This chapter has outlined the paradigm and methodological framework underpinning the study. Issues such as validity, reliability, reflexivity and ethical practice were also addressed. Chapter 4 will present the research findings from the focus groups.

Chapter 4: Findings

4.0 Introduction

This chapter will outline the findings from data gathered from the two focus groups. The research is focusing on the perceived relevance of social media platforms on friendship formation in adolescence. Upon completion of the focus groups, the researcher analysed the resulting data, and extrapolated the key themes that emerged (see Chapter 3). To preserve the anonymity of the focus group students, pseudonyms will be used and the specific location of the focus groups will not be disclosed.

4.1 Participant Profile

The 19 participants (post primary students) in this research were mixed gender and attended a co-educational post-primary school. The students in FG1 were second-year students and ranged in age from 13-15. The students in FG2 were fourth-year students and ranged in age from 15-16. All of the students owned smart phones and were familiar with the use of different social platforms.

4.2 Overarching Themes

Four overarching themes emerged from the focus groups highlighting a range of issues:

1. The nature of friendships: online versus offline
2. The need to feel constantly connected
3. The perceived impact of social media on self-esteem
4. The effect of social media on school life

Quotations taken directly from the transcribed focus groups will promote credibility and transparency of each theme.

4.2.1 The Nature of Friendships: online versus offline

The first overarching theme, and a particular focus of this study, relates to the perceived value students place on their friendships during adolescence. All 19 students in the two focus groups expressed that the primary purpose for using social media platforms is to communicate with their friends. The majority of students in both focus groups acknowledged that they have also formed friendships online with

people whom they were not previously acquainted with. However, they reported that these friendships would not be formed with total strangers, but with friends of friends. This was made possible through different apps that allowed for multiple students to partake in online gaming, video chats or group chats. Conversely, two students, one from each focus group, admitted to forming friendships with complete strangers. They were convinced that these people were genuine as they had checked their profiles on different social media sites and had either video chatted or had had lengthy telephone calls with them. Both students emphasised these people were “very good friends” although they had never met them in person.

Interestingly, students from both focus groups agreed that it is difficult to acknowledge people they have befriended online when they meet them face-to-face socially. The acknowledgement can be minimal, a salute or just saying “hello”, but never a full conversation. These types of encounters have sometimes led to students feeling embarrassed when these greetings have been ignored, which indicates that students appear to be able to engage in an artificial type of intimacy online, but not necessarily in the real world.

It was apparent that the students in both focus groups relied heavily on social media to reinforce friendships with 15 of the 19 students declaring that they find online contact easier than instigating face-to-face conversations. In FG1, which consisted of younger students, the students cited shyness, fear of judgement and anonymity as the main reasons for this. One participant stated “on your phone it’s just words on a screen. It’s very different”. The majority of students in the FG2 stated that whilst social media was a good platform to initiate conversation, face-to-face exchanges were more preferable with close friends. But online sites proved convenient when distance prevented them from spending time with friends. Whilst it was easier to initiate friendships through social media sites, the platforms also served to strengthen existing friendships that had been formed in person.

In FG1 the students seemed to be very aware of how online conversations can play out differently compared to face-to-face interaction. During online interactions they have the ability to prepare and edit but often this dialogue can be misconstrued due to lack of tone. The fact that others might gain an impression of the student based on

this was of significance to them. The students in FG2 were quick to acknowledge that social media was an extremely helpful tool when they made the transition from primary to post-primary school. They stated that with Snapchat it was very acceptable to “snap” people in their year group in order to strike up a friendship. However, the very idea of sending a meaningless “snap” as a senior student was perceived as a juvenile activity. For these older students their friendships were already formed at this stage and their social media contacts are established friends:

The friends I have online are the same as the ones I have off-line. I'd prefer to have friends I can talk to face-to-face. I prefer spending time with my friends in real life.

(FG2H)

However, some students in the FG2 did express a lack of closeness in their online friendships. One participant spoke of her exasperation with social media platforms, feeling that they had replaced face-to-face interactions and, therefore, had diminished some of the friendships she had formed:

I'd rather have phone calls with people... I am sick of having useless, pointless conversations... I realised that if I wouldn't have proper conversations with my friends any more that we wouldn't be as close.

(FG2F)

Other students in FG2 stated that most of their online interaction was predominantly with close friends and friendships which had been formed on-line proved frivolous. They acknowledged that they would send a meaningless message to a wide range of their online contacts, so irrelevant were these messages that the sender would not keep tabs on whether they had been opened by the receiver or not. This “batch-sending” of futile messages appeared to be commonplace amongst the students in FG2. However, this led to some uncomfortable encounters when students had been asked by on-line acquaintances to stop including them in group messages as they no longer wished to receive this type of correspondence, which led to feelings of embarrassment for the sender. Finally, another finding across between the two focus groups was that although the time spent on-line by students had increased the number of people they were interacting with decreased.

4.2.2 The Need to Feel Constantly Connected

All participants in this study stated that their primary reason for using social media was to keep contact with their friends, thus being constantly connected. The majority

of them were unaware of the exact length of time they spent on their mobile phones daily, however some students had mobile phones with an application which reported how much screen time they used. Students in FG1 claimed to spend between two and three hours daily on their phones, whilst students in FG2 reported to spend between two and five and a half hours daily on them. The students who knew exactly how long they spent on their phones either had parental restrictions in place or had the app to inform them. Some students in FG2 expressed surprise at the amount of time they spent on their phone, describing it as “shocking” (FG2F), “I’d prefer not to be on [my phone] as much” (FG2D), “you don’t realise how long you’ve been having [a conversation] for” (FG2C).

The issue of constant connection was also evident when students discussed their usage of Snapchat. This app was the most preferred and frequently used social media platform with 17 of the 19 students citing it as their favourite. The students in FG1 merely acknowledged Snapchat as their favoured application, however much of the discussion in FG2 centred on the merits and shortcomings of the app. This platform possesses features that directly influence connection and instigates compulsive behaviours. It promotes the idea of “streaks”. A streak involves a snap being sent back and forth between two friends for consecutive days, each day is deemed as one streak, the streak is continued when both students send each other a snap every day and is lost if this connection is broken.

The FG2 students referred to such addictive behaviours which have become part of their daily routine and how the banality of the snap content was irrelevant once the streak number continued to increase. So addictive was this activity that students trusted their friends to continue their streak if for some reason they were unable to access their phones, leaving them vulnerable as this person now had free reign over their account which could be easily abused. Some students spoke of continuing streaks during arguments with their friends, confident that the quarrel would be resolved and streaks would not have been forfeited. One student from FG2 spoke of the disappointment that comes with losing a streak of 300 days. However, as these addictive behaviours were being discussed there was also a strong sense from FG2 that these actions were juvenile, merely habits that had continued from a time when they were more acceptable. Some students disclosed how they no longer wanted to

keep up streaks with acquaintances but they felt obliged to do so; “it would be more hassle if you didn’t” (FG2A), and “you are kind of put under pressure to go on your phone sometimes. Like, oh right, I’ll just go on it for my streaks” (FG2D). Snapchat has lost its appeal for some of these students, but they still use it as their friends continued to communicate via the app. Some students expressed how not being involved in certain on-line activity would leave them feeling “left out”. These students did want to be constantly connected but only with close friends “instead of snapping everyone” (FG2A).

Students were asked how they would feel if they were totally removed from social media. Some of the students from FG1 seemed willing to live without social media but certain conditions had to be met. Some would be happy to abstain provided they were not the only ones abstaining, whilst others claimed it would be easy to abstain if their friends lived in close proximity to them. For others, the thought of living without social media made them fearful of missing out. It became evident that social circles would be diminished as students would no longer be able to contact friends who did not attend the same school. In FG2, 6 of the 9 students said they would choose not to have social media, with the remaining 3 stating that their preference would be to continue using social media but wished that Snapchat would no longer be available to anyone.

4.2.3 The Perceived Impact of Social Media on Self-Esteem

The third theme that emerged in the data was the possible impact of social media on students’ self-esteem. Students in the FG1 sometimes found social media platforms an easier method of communication, especially for the more introverted students. Some self-proclaimed shy students revealed a fear of initiating face-to-face conversations, preferring the anonymity that accompanies online activity. Anonymity generated a form of confidence they would not usually have, allowing students to “say stuff online that I wouldn’t say face-to-face” (FG1F). They expressed a fear of being judged during face-to-face interactions and knowing you are “because you can see that they are judging you” (FG1A), whereas on-line conversations permitted them to be more deliberate with what they wrote.

Interestingly, the students in FG1 who acknowledged that shyness was a key factor in their attachment to social media also confessed to spending sleepless nights conversing with others through the medium. These feelings of being judged was also an issue that arose in FG2. One senior participant disclosed how he was made to feel disloyal by his friends when he wished to widen his friendship circle and, therefore, felt more comfortable reaching out to people on-line (FG2A). Other students in FG2 agreed that this would be a reasonable account of how a situation like this could transpire. When probed a little further it became clear that to enter into new friendship groups at this stage of their schooling was crossing some invisible social line; “I’m not saying it always happens but there are people like that, that would judge you like” (FG2A).

The issue of being judged by their peers regarding their online activity also transpired when students publically acknowledged something they were interested in by “liking it” or commenting on it on social media. These behaviours made students targets for others to question or perhaps even ridicule their interest. “They can judge you for what you liked or what you didn’t” (FG1H). Students in the senior focus group (FG2) reported similar experiences but not to the same degree as with FG1 as they seemed to be more aware that people can be judgemental. They chose to either steer clear of online sites that encouraged negativity, such as Facebook, or were more careful about the content they posted and how they reacted to other people’s posts. They referred to Instagram, which they considered to be an attractive option as there are restrictions around leaving comments, i.e. only the person who posted the original post can see how many people ‘liked’ their status.

Students in FG1 were very cognisant of how comments made online can be misconstrued, how a comment that may be intended as a joke or sarcasm has the potential to be taken more seriously than intended. This was a genuine concern, “they might take it the wrong way and then they’d start a rumour and then they’d be against you and you don’t know where to go” (FG1D). Concerns about personal reputational damage emerged; “it could be like if you do something bad you wouldn’t have a good reputation from other people, which could be (a negative thing) in school as well” (FG1I). Whilst this was a dominant issue in FG1 it was not evident in FG2.

The issue of personal safety emerged in both focus groups; however disparate concerns arose for both groups. In FG1, the students were governed more by parental restrictions than the students in FG2. These constraints ranged from limiting internet access, to being without their mobile device during homework or study, to having designated areas for storage of their phones overnight. However, such boundaries appeared to be more casual for students in FG2, with some students divulging that parents “tried” to restrict their usage, but it was more commonplace for them not to have restrictions around their usage.

All of the students in FG1 stated that they had taken time to filter their privacy settings on every social media platform they were members of. Some students in FG2 Focus Group 2 seemed to possess a very blasé approach to this, maintaining that the information they shared was minimal and, therefore, did not require filters; “There is not enough information about me on it like, maybe a few photos but that wouldn’t bother me because it is up there, I put it there, so wouldn’t bother me anyway” (FG2E). This nonchalant approach was compounded when it emerged that eight of the nine of students had shared their passwords with their trusted friends.

Finally, there was consensus amongst students in both groups on the topic of internet safety talks in school. Students were exasperated with the amount of talks they had to attend to inform them about online safety; one a year since primary school and occasionally more; “We have had so many talks now it’s kind of drilled into us” (FG2C). They perceived them to be repetitive and thought that the stories told to them were exaggerated in an attempt to scare them, “I think they kind of exaggerate it so much like. People aren’t that stupid like” (FG2G, 2018). They considered themselves to have sufficient common sense to stay safe during their internet use. Although, students in both groups claimed they would never chat with strangers online, as mentioned previously, this was not the case for two students. It also emerged that some of the students would allow strangers “follow” them online if they were from their locality or had befriended other people within their local area.

4.2.4 The Effect of Social Media on Students’ School Life

The final theme relates to the positive and negative experiences of students’ school life due to social media. Social media proved to have a positive impact on social

interactions and being part of social media groups extended their social circle in school. It was also deemed a useful way to access homework if they were absent or out on school activities. Social media also provided a portal through which students could request help from peers on difficult issues. The students disclosed that they used social media to educate themselves on everyday matters believing that such platforms are the equivalent of papers to this generation and should be used for educational purposes.

One finding that emerged across both focus groups was how choosing to abstain from social media could lead to feeling excluded in school;

You'd kind of feel left out, everybody else would be on it and they'd be talking about stuff and then the next day they might be talking about it in school and you'd be there like, what are you talking about and you wouldn't have a clue what's going on

(FG1C)

Some students in FG2 reported similar experiences of exclusion if they abstained from social media for any length of time. FG2D spoke of feeling “out of the loop” on occasions when he had not accessed social media in an evening. FG2D further compounded this by adding “you want to be involved”. Another student in the same group purported similar feelings of exclusion:

It would be more hassle if you didn't keep contact with your friends on Snapchat and stuff, because they'd be talking about it the next day and you're kind of left out. It's too much pressure

(FG2A)

Both groups also discussed how conflict that arose online could lead to awkward face-to-face conversations. Students in FG2 reported that it was easier to sort out conflict face-to-face rather than online.

Interestingly, the FG1 students discussed how there were parental restrictions for their phone usage whilst doing homework, but these restrictions were not evident for senior students. Students in FG2 were unsupervised during homework, with some acknowledging that their homework took longer to complete as they were distracted by occurrences on their social media. The negative impact of such distractions on student's learning emerged:

It has a (negative) impact on my homework anyway because I have my phone with me in the room, I would get distracted by it like. It might take me like half an hour longer to do my homework. I don't go on my phone in school at all so it doesn't really affect my school life in school.

(FG2E)

With regard to students availing of support if issues arose online for them, surprisingly only five of the nineteen students indicated that they would seek help from the school guidance counsellor. Their willingness to avail of this type of support depended on how serious they perceived the situation to be, and they would only attend if they were faced with a major issue:

I'd probably tell like a close friend or like my sister or something. But if it got really out of hand or something, then maybe I would go and speak to the Guidance Counsellor.

(FG1B)

One younger student believed that the guidance counsellor would be the best qualified person to assist with any issue.

I'd go to her first because she'd like know what to say because she's been trained for that kind of stuff like so, yeah I go to her first.

(FG1F)

In FG2, two of the students would go to the guidance counsellor, but this was dependent on the relationship:

It would depend on what kind of relationship I have with the guidance counsellor. Do you know what I mean? If I like them I'd kind of feel more comfortable talking to them.

(FG2H)

All of the other students in both focus groups stated that they would confide in their parents, older siblings or close friends in an attempt to resolve issues. In FG1, for example, FG1C suggested that he would feel more comfortable speaking with his parents, whereas FG1B and FG1D expressed that they would be more comfortable confiding in a close friend. Many participants in FG2 felt similar to this; "I'd probably go to my parents before the guidance counsellor. Yeah I wouldn't go to the guidance counsellor, I'd go to my parents" (FG2E).

Finally, student FG2C spoke about his lack of connection with his guidance counsellor and suggested that his connection with his parents was stronger;

I've never ever talked to the guidance counsellor, I'd always go to my parents first, definitely. I'm not afraid to talk. I'd tell them straight out what happened. I wouldn't really feel comfortable going to a stranger talking about like bullying or something.

(FG2C)

4.3 Summary of Findings

To summarise, the perceived impact of social media on friendship formation, the findings from both focus groups indicate that its use has both positive and negative implications. For some students online friendships serve to deepen existing relationships, but for others these forms of contact proved no different to offline friendships. The findings suggest that students in this study desire a constant connection with others but only on their own terms and with people they want to be connected to. They do not wish to be in contact with acquaintances out of obligation. Whilst they are aware that social media by its very nature was created to allow people to connect with greater ease, in some instances it serves to have the adverse effect by restricting face-to-face contact, therefore making them more dependent on online friendships.

The findings intimate that social media usage impacts the self-esteem of students of this age cohort. Lack of face-to-face contact leaves issues unresolved and students feeling anxious, whilst waiting for this contact. It was evident that introverted students may find it easier to form online friendships. Among these particular students, shyness seems to be a major reason for using online technology to form friendships. It is apparent that although Snapchat is the most preferred social media platform by most students, for the older students in this focus group its negative connotations outweigh its merits.

The issues of addictive behaviour and parental restrictions on social media also emerged in both focus groups. The study found that parental restrictions or lack of them also appears to effect students' internet use and therefore their connections with friends. It was apparent that parents had more control over limiting the use of social media with students in FG1 than in FG2. Interestingly both groups reported a willingness to abstain from social media. FG1 conceded they would find this easier if there was a blanket restriction for everyone with FG2 expressing it to be a more individual preference.

The data from the focus groups suggests that social media also impacts on school life and engagement in learning. When it comes to social media, school management have offered students many opportunities to avail of internet safety talks and they

seem up to speed with all the issues that could potentially arise. However, they believe internet safety is over-taught and that issues addressed in these classes will not impact on them.

4.4 Conclusion

This chapter presented the findings of two focus groups with 19 students who actively use social media platforms in their everyday lives in order to maintain and enhance friendships. The following chapter will discuss these findings in relation to the literature review in Chapter 2.

Chapter 5: Discussion

5.0 Introduction

This study aimed to explore the relevance of social media platforms in adolescent friendship formation. The purpose of this chapter is to synthesise the primary findings with the literature in the context of the research questions (Thomas 2103).

5.1 Research Questions of Study

The primary research question of this study asked “*What role do social media platforms play in friendship formation in adolescence?*” The findings elucidate the views and opinions of students involved in this study on their personal experiences of social media platforms in their formation with friends. The secondary research questions related to the communicative value of social media platforms, the influence they may have on student friendships and the relevance their usage can have on the development of students.

The findings highlight issues which are pivotal to the research topic. All participants in this study expressed the significance of social media use in their everyday lives. However, the use of social media platforms appears to blur the lines between online and offline activity amongst students. Equally the findings seem to suggest that the communicative value of social media has both positive and negative attributes for these students.

The findings will be addressed in the upcoming sections with careful consideration given to the key issues that emerged in the study:

1. Communicative value of social media platforms for adolescent students
2. Impact of social media platforms on adolescent friendship formation
3. Perceived effect of social media usage on the everyday lives of adolescents

5.2 Communicative Value of Social Media Platforms for Adolescent Students

This section will address the perceived communication value, both positive and negative, of social media for adolescents. This will be addressed through the perceived educational significance communicating in this way, whilst also

considering the merits of online versus offline communication. This will be deliberated from the point of view of previous literature and the opinions expressed by the participants of this study.

5.2.1. Educational Value of Social Media Platforms

Social media platforms play an important role in the lives of adolescents today. It allows for a form of creative expression and exposes them to the occurrences of the world around them without them ever having to watch news programmes on television or pick up a newspaper (Knutson 2018). This was apparent in this study where one student (FG2G) referred to social media platforms being educational, comparing them to newspapers, whilst others acknowledged how they used such platforms for watching online news items. In addition to this, social media platforms have also been considered a positive addition to learning due to the communication and collaboration they allow between students. Willbold (2019) believes that both education and social media go hand in hand. She recognises that students access recent and relevant data through social media platforms and acknowledges the convenience of these platforms when students communicate with each other for homework or assignment purposes.

Furthermore Heffner (2018) refers to the comfort students have in using social media platforms as an outlet for coping with academic frustration, suggesting that online connection allows for retrospective discussion of class material whilst also encouraging social networking. The findings in this study concur, whereby some students conveyed the convenience of social media in receiving their homework when absent from school and how they tend to communicate with friends around certain aspects of their homework and studies. However, for the Senior Cycle students in this study, the use of social media platforms was not solely positive. They reported how oftentimes their access to social media served to be more of a hindrance and distraction than an aid when it comes to homework, invariably adding to the amount of time it should take them to complete it. Interestingly this was not the case for the Junior Cycle students due to the restrictions put in place by their parents. It was evident from this study that parents of younger teenagers from Focus Group 1 (JC group) were vigilant around monitoring their teenager's mobile phone use, whereas the approach to this appeared to be less rigorous in Focus Group 2.

5.2.2 Online and Offline Communication

Kennedy and Lynch (2016) consider the difficulties identifying the boundaries of online versus offline social participation. It is evident that this is an issue for the students in the current study. Some students expressed that they were more confident communicating online, whereas others found little difference between online and offline communication. Nevertheless, engaging on social media platforms may result in students feeling more socially competent (Archer 2012; Hampton *et al.* 2011; Kennedy and Lynch 2016) with an increased communication skill set (Schurgin O’Keefe *et al.* 2011). However the findings of the current study indicate that this may not be necessarily true. It was reported that whilst students felt more confident interacting through social media they were often shy and self-conscious when meeting their fellow students face-to-face. Furthermore, the students reported that social media platforms impacted their perceptions of friendships, believing that these platforms had erased the social norms of face-to-face meetings and the bonds that can only be made through face-to-face interactions. This correlates with Batcho’s (2014) claims that social media, whilst viewed as a positive change, has encouraged a sense of antisocial distancing and a suggestion that the quality of face-to-face interactions being negatively impacted.

Interestingly a survey conducted with British students found that 63% would not care if social media platforms did not exist and 71% had reported being on a break from them (Digital Awareness UK 2017). These views were similar to those reported by students in this study who spoke about feeling pressure from their peers to be online and also the fear of missing out. Some of the students felt they could not escape the pressures of having to be constantly connected. These pressures came from friends requiring, what they perceived to be, an immediate response and acquaintances whom they felt obliged to answer even when they did not wish to.

The Pew Research Centre (2018) found that adolescents are more likely to associate their social media use with positive feelings rather than negative, indicating that it made them feel included, confident, authentic and outgoing. In this study students reported that their increased social interactions were due to them being more confident to be themselves behind a screen. They also reported feeling somewhat judged within their friend groups when conversing face-to-face but expressed that

this was not something they experienced during online encounters. The findings suggest that interaction through social media platforms can remove barriers such as shyness and fear of judgement, which would prevent them from interacting with others face-to-face. This proves to be a double-edged sword for students when trying to navigate through the idiosyncrasies of friendship formation in today's world of technology.

Another positive attribute of social media platforms which was evident throughout this study is how this manner of communication serves to widen students' social circles. Students who may not necessarily have been friends, but merely acquaintances, have had their relationships strengthened through these platforms. This concurs with Ahn's (2012) observation that frequent online communication and self-disclosure will result in consolidating relationships and increasing one's social capital. The My World Survey finding (2019) also compound this, suggesting that adolescents use social media as a means of extending their offline social circle. For the students in this study it allows them to build relationships with others of their own age who share similar interests. The students in Focus Group 2 (Senior Cycle) voiced how they may not have had the opportunity to meet such people without social media platforms.

5.3 Impact of Social Media Platforms on Adolescent Friendship Formation

This section will address both the positive and negative impact that communicating through social media can have on friendships as reported by the students in this study in conjunction with previous literature.

5.3.1 Positive Impact

Social media platforms enhance social capital, and it appears that this can impact positively on those who engage with it. The importance of social capital for students and how frequent communication serves to elevate friendship status is evident in contemporary society (Ahn 2012). This emerged in the current study with students reporting that their online activity has expanded their circle of friends. Whilst reluctant to correspond with total strangers they were happy to converse with friends of their friends and build new friendships in this manner. Their online communication with friends was considered a continuation of face-to-face

conversations that had occurred throughout the day. The Senior Cycle students in this study referred to the importance of feeling connected to friends through social media once face-to-face interactions had ceased. This positive attribute of the use of social media supports Bengtsson's (2016) idea of how online interactions between adolescents can serve to enhance their face-to-face encounters and therefore strengthen the friendships.

Keeping in constant contact through social media platforms has also become an acceptable way to assuage the usual adolescent insecurities with peers who may have encountered similar experiences (Schurgin O'Keefe *et al.* 2011). Yang and Brown (2013) found that adolescents adjusting to new environments predominantly use social networking sites to maintain relationships as opposed to establishing new friendships. The findings of this study concur with this view, whilst some students reported that they had formed new friendships online with complete strangers who shared common interests, the majority of them interacted solely with their friends. Yang and Brown (2013) also found that irrespective of motivation, the more students engaged in online interactions through social media sites the less their sense of loneliness and better their social adjustment is. This also pertains to the current study in the context of transition from primary to post primary school. The students in both focus groups spoke of the acceptable nature of connecting online with other students whom they were merely acquainted with, whilst they were establishing their core group of friends. The students in Focus Group 2 (Senior Cycle) also reported experiences of interacting in this manner during their earlier school years, but explained how it was no longer necessary once friend-groups were established.

5.3.2 Negative Aspects of Social Media Communication

As well as having a positive impact on students' life and friendships, social media platforms can also have a negative bearing. Smith *et al.* (2017) discuss how perceived social media ostracism for a student can threaten their self-esteem, their control and their need to belong. Students spoke of how their online activity can affect their face-to-face social encounters, they expressed feeling 'left out' in school if they had not been engaging in online activity the previous night. This exclusion did not arise from intentional ostracism by peers but rather circumstantial, arising from them being unable to be present online for one reason or another. Interestingly,

when online conversations were continued in school there was a felt sense of exclusion. However unintentional it may have been, the negative feeling was undeniable for them. Furthermore, in this study students who spent less time on social media platforms were those whose parents had restrictions in place. According to Floros and Siomos (2013) such restrictions which prevent students from connecting with their peers may serve to isolate them and therefore lead to feelings of exclusion. Unfortunately, this negative aspect of disconnection from one's peers "may go unnoticed by those who did not grow up with, or grow accustomed to, online social connectedness" (Floros and Siomos 2013, p.532).

Whilst the Senior Cycle students expressed the importance of connecting with friends outside school they also voiced the pointlessness of some of their online interactions. Pinker's (2014) questioned how the vast number of social media friends that teenagers purport to have can all be important to them, however some of the students admitted to ignoring contact from acquaintances due to the volume of messages they received. This study found that although the students reported spending more time on-line with friends, the amount of people they were interacting with was not significant.

Margalit (2014) reports that online communication is often perceived to be easier than interacting with people face-to-face. This did not always appear to be the case in this study. The students expressed their awareness around the lack of social cues that were associated with online activity. They were conscious of how online communications can be misconstrued and not taken in the manner they were meant. Invariably this confused communication can cause upset and distress, yet the perpetrator might be blissfully unaware of its impact. This proved to be a real stressor for these students, knowing that the consequences of the unintentional upset could manifest in some unpleasant manner during the subsequent school day. In addition, students in this study spoke of how online comments can be misconstrued when devoid of facial expression and tone.

Furthermore, Lenhart (2015) reported how conflict can escalate online as people tend to be less inhibited when on a computer than they would be if they were speaking face-to-face with someone. Conflicts that arise online can spill over into face-to-face interactions and these students found that the exchanges that followed in school can

be awkward. Similarly, Lenhart reported how ‘drama’ can often flow “back and forth from in-person to online conflict and back again” (Lenhart 2015, para.7). With online issues having the propensity to encroach on the school environment causing disruption there is an onus on school management to protect their pupils. Purdy and McGuckin (2015) acknowledge a need for more definitive guidelines around the distinction between occurrences that happen in school and out of school time.

5.4 Perceived Effect of Social Media Usage on the Everyday Lives of Adolescents

This section will address the perceived influence of social media on the development of students. It will also address the support network for the students who took part in this study and consider the importance of a guidance counsellor within the school system.

5.4.1 Developmental Impact of being Constantly Connected

Erikson’s psychosocial theory (1950) emphasised how a changing social environment places demands on adolescents often triggering a struggle between identity and role confusion. Erikson believed that during this developmental stage adolescents were primarily concerned with how others viewed them as opposed to who they believed they really were. Fullwood *et. al* (2016), highlighted that adolescents who have difficulty defining their identity are more susceptible to manifesting an idealised one online. Fullwood *et. al* (2016) also consider that online interaction has adolescents experimenting with different personality traits they might wish to adopt were it publically okay to do so. However, the findings of this study do not necessarily concur with this, the participants expressed that they feel more themselves online and make more of an effort to alter their personality in the presence of their peers in an attempt to fit in. It transpired very strongly through the findings that these students were very fearful of being judged by their peers on their social media conduct. Therefore, the fear of judgement comes from their reality rather than online.

As the prominent aspects of adolescent development now tend to involve the use of social media, the time spent on these platforms has increased dramatically. According to Erikson (1950) this is occurring during a period where adolescents are

exploring their independence and are developing a sense of self. Therefore, caution must be exercised when considering the amount of time spent on social media. Andreassen & Pallesen (2014) proposed a definition of addiction in terms of social media usage whereby it becomes an issue when it impacts on other important areas of a person's life. The findings in the current study suggest some level of addiction towards social media platforms whereby students spoke of their phone use distracting them from what was going on around them. They also cited family occasions as a typical example of their disconnection where they would insist on being on their phones as opposed to being present with the people around them. Interestingly, these students did not perceive their habits to be addictive behaviours, despite the long hours they were spending online. Floros and Siomos (2013) believe this is due to the fact that "this generation is interconnected with digital ties that mean a great deal for their self-regulation" (p.532), suggesting social media connection to be a necessity rather than a commodity for these students. From this study it is apparent that it is the norm for students to use social media in their daily communications with one Junior Cycle student highlighting that they had grown up with it and had never known life without it.

5.4.2 School Supports Available for Students

Evidence from the My World Survey (Dooley *et al*, 2019), highlights the positive influence that 'One Good Adult' can have in the lives of adolescents. Microsoft released the findings of its Digital Civility Index (2019) which reported that the negative consequences for young people engaging with technology remains high. However, it also purported that the number of teenagers who sought help from an adult around internet safety issues had increased substantially. Hallahan (2019) believes that when teenagers are educated around internet safety they are more inclined to seek help when dealing with online risks. When education on internet safety was discussed in this study the students reported that it was overlaboured, expressing that they were aware of the dangers and if targeted they would not respond. However, some students in Focus Group 2 (Senior Cycle) spoke of sharing their login details for social media platforms with their friends. Alarming as this may sound, these students did not consider this a risk as they reported that they did not share personal information under their public profile on these sites.

The *My World Survey* (2019) reported that 15% of the adolescents they surveyed had experienced bullying which occurred at home, online or by text. Adolescents who experience bullying are more likely to report episodes of poor mental health and wellbeing (Dooley & Fitzgerald 2012). The students who took part in this study did not report any incidents of online bullying. However when questioned on who they would turn to if faced with a situation like this all students agreed that if they were to encounter any difficulties they would tell someone, be it a sibling, parent or their school guidance counsellor. This is at odds with the findings of the *My World Survey* undertaken in Ireland in 2012 where it emerged that victims of cyber-bullying rarely told an adult.

The Framework for Junior Cycle (2015) states that “the junior cycle years are a critical time in young peoples” lives. They require support to make positive responsible decisions relating to their health and wellbeing and the wellbeing of others’ (p.22). Therefore, it is the responsibility of schools to provide a holistic education to students, supporting their emotional and psychological needs. The IGC (2008) defines the provision of guidance counselling to include personal/social, educational and career counselling, and therefore the issues associated with social media that pertain to impact student wellbeing is of concern to the guidance counsellor. Furthermore, Hearne and Galvin (2014) consider student wellbeing as a fundamental element of the role of the guidance counsellor. However, in this study the role of the guidance counsellor seemed almost an elusive entity for the students as many of them did not consider visiting their guidance counsellor when difficulties arose for them. For the students who did consider visiting their guidance counsellor when they encountered upset, they mostly did so having consulted with someone else first. It became apparent that the guidance counsellor in their school was in situ on a temporary basis. The students felt they had not built up a rapport with her which led to their reluctance to avail of this service. Whilst a primary role of the guidance counsellor is to support student wellbeing, the NCCA (2007) highlights that guidance provision is the responsibility of the whole school community. Therefore the guidance plan and school policies are required to incorporate guidelines around the usage of social media by students.

5.6 Conclusion

This chapter discussed the three overarching themes that emerged in relation to the study around the relevance of social media platforms in friendship formation in adolescence. Through engagement with pre-existing literature and the findings of this study, a number of important insights emerged including; the communicative value of social media platforms, the relevance they have on adolescent friendships, the effect that this relatively new means of communication has on adolescent development and the support systems that they avail of when necessary. The following chapter (Chapter 6) will conclude this research study through discussion of the implications of this study and by proposing recommendations which have emerged from it.

Chapter 6: Conclusion

6.0 Introduction

The purpose of this chapter is to provide a conclusion within the perspective of the aim and objectives of this study and address the policy, practice and research implications of the findings. The chapter will discuss the strengths and limitations of the study. A number of recommendations which were informed by the overall findings will also be addressed here. Finally, a reflective examination of the study will be presented from the perspective of the researcher.

6.1 Overview of the Findings

The overall aim of this study was to explore post primary students' perceptions of the relevance of social media platforms on the formation of friendships in adolescence. The secondary aim was to consider the relevance that social media use may have on the psychological development of adolescents and contemplate its impact from an educational perspective. The objectives were to review relevant existing literature, to examine the relevance of the use of social media platforms for friendship formation and to explore the impact that social media platforms may have on adolescents regarding their secondary school experiences through the narrative of the student.

Whilst there is a body of research in the area of relationship development in adolescence (Ahn 2012; Giletta *et al.* 2012; Ging and O'Higgins Norman 2016; Güroglu *et al.* 2012; Hartup and Stevens 1997; Pinker 2014) and adolescents use of social media platforms (Bengtsson 2012; Bloomfield Neira and Barber 2014; Kennedy and Lynch 2016; Kraut *et al.* 2002; Mihailidis 2014; Schurgin O'Keefe *et al.* 2011; Valkenburg *et al.* 2006), there seems to be very a lack of Irish research that addresses the relevance of social media usage for friendship formation and if social media platforms can influence adolescent development.

The interpretivist approach taken in this study provided insights into the perceived relevance of social media usage on friendship formation amongst adolescents. This was articulated by a sample of Junior and Senior Cycle secondary school students in one school. Overall the findings highlight issues which are pivotal to the research topic. The students shared their experiences and impressions of their usage of social

media platforms over the course of their teenage years. These included the need for constant connection with their peers, the need to feel included and the feelings associated with exclusion. Consequently, social media platforms have a significant role to play in friendship formation among adolescents which correlates with Doty and Dworkin (2013) who found that maintaining friendships, making connections and information gathering are the main reasons adolescents use social media platforms. This study emphasised that social media consolidates relationships for adolescents through the suggestion of being constantly connected.

It became apparent in this study that social media platforms are quickly becoming a steadfast commodity from an educational perspective also. This concurs with existing literature (Bloomfield Neira and Barber 2014; Schurgin O’Keefe *et al.* 2011; Valkenburg *et al.* 2006) which found interaction through social media platforms is used predominantly for sharing ideas on homework and group projects.

However, a survey conducted in Britain (Digital Awareness UK 2017) reported that a large majority of adolescents were beginning to move away from social media platforms due to the expectation to be constantly engaging with their peers. Similarly, this study found that the participating adolescents experienced some negative aspects of social media platforms which also pertained to being constantly connected, with students feeling pressure to be ‘always on’. The students also reported that their studies were affected by the constant distraction of social media platforms, with the older adolescents in particular reporting that they find it difficult to disengage from these platforms and therefore their friends.

Whilst acknowledging the responsibility of personal and social guidance counselling to be a whole school endeavour, the Department of Education and Skills (2013) identifies that the guidance counsellor is a prominent figure in the support structure for students. However, the usage of social media has relevance for all staff in terms of providing proper boundaries and support. Hearne and Galvin (2014) acknowledge that provision of guidance in post-primary schools is a whole school responsibility they also consider student wellbeing to be a central responsibility of the guidance counsellor. Conversely, the majority of adolescents who took part in this study reported a lack of connection between them and their guidance counsellor.

6.2 Strengths and Limitations of the Research Study

6.2.1 Strengths

One of the key strengths in this study is the use of the interpretivist paradigm. This facilitated the collection of rich qualitative data through focus groups which were deemed appropriate to address the research questions (Thomas 2013). This approach enabled the researcher to gain insight into the adolescents' experiences of social media use that may not have been attained from quantitative methods (Cohen *et al.* 2013). Additionally, the narratives provided in the focus groups were indicative of the lived experiences, feelings and opinions of the students (Bryman 2012). Furthermore, the nature of the focus groups allowed for a relaxed and open relationship between the researcher and the adolescent participants. The study also incorporated a mixed gender sample promoting a diverse array of data recorded. The data findings from the focus groups may prove beneficial in informing guidance counsellors, school management and teachers around the influence of social media platforms on the everyday lives of their students.

6.2.2 Limitations

There are also a number of limitations to note in this study. The interpretivist approach used depended on the participants personal narratives. Therefore, it proves difficult to generalise the findings outside the confines of this study as it assumes that experiences are different for each individual (Thomas 2013). However, the findings of this particular study may be typical of the situation in other post primary schools. Due to the possible subjectivity of the researcher a reflexive approach was taken to address personal bias and misinterpretation throughout the research process (Cohen *et al.* 2011, Thomas 2013). The fact that the researcher chose to carry out focus groups only, also proved a limiting factor. The researcher was mindful that the inclusion of additional research such as guidance counsellor or parent interviews would have served to enhance the study. It was not possible, however, due to the time constraints involved to undertake this study.

6.3 Recommendations

Based on the findings of this study, several recommendations can be made regarding policy, practice and further research:

1. When educating Junior and Senior Cycle students on the use of social media the responsibility lies with the School and the DES to provide a distinct localised method.

Considering the distinct developmental difference between Junior and Senior Cycle students there should be a conscious effort by schools to utilise the curriculum in supporting their students at key developmental milestones pertaining to social media use.

2. Some schools may be relying on the expertise of outside speakers to educate their pupils on the dangers of social media usage. Perhaps consideration for an in-house approach would prove more effective if incorporated in the new Junior Cycle curriculum as a short-course for students.
3. It would be of benefit for schools to review their policy on social media usage within the school environment, especially regarding students. Consideration should be given for a directive to be put in place in the event of issues arising online between students which have the opportunity to spill into the school environment where the onus is on staff to diffuse the situation.
4. There is a need to inform and educate the students' parents on adolescents' use of social media platforms and promote the benefits of parental involvement in their child's social media use.
5. Time needs to be invested in making the students aware of the multifaceted role of the guidance counsellor and the availability of the guidance counselling services to ensure that they have someone to reach out to in times of difficulty.
6. Further consideration should be given to reinstate the ex-quota guidance counsellor by the DES into post primary schools so as to ensure all students receive appropriate access to guidance.
7. Considering the speed at which technology is constantly evolving there is a need for the DES to offer more consistent CPD to both teachers and guidance counsellors around the usage and the impact that social media platforms have on the personal and behavioural development of our students.
8. A more comprehensive study into the effect of social media platform use by students would be beneficial to a broader range of professionals in the educational system. To incorporate the opinions and experiences of guidance

counsellors or perhaps even to re-interview the same individuals a year or so later would make for an interesting addition to this study. Perhaps using alternative methods such as questionnaires or individual interviews would also serve to obtain a larger wealth of information.

6.4 Reflexivity and Personal Learning

Reflexivity provided an opportunity for the researcher to reflect on the impact of her personal experiences on the research process (Patton 2002). It also allowed for a greater understanding of the experience keeping the personal, social and cultural context of the researcher to the fore (Etherington 2004). Etherington (2004) highlighted the use of self-questioning, note taking and keeping a research diary through all stages of the research process which the researcher endeavoured to do.

This process proved educative for the researcher as it heightened her awareness and understanding of how the use of social media platforms can impact adolescent attitudes and behaviours. The prevalence of social media usage is a constant in their lives and therefore cannot be ignored within the school setting. Previous misconceptions had the researcher making presumptions on the relevance of social media platforms. However, as the process progressed from the literature review through to the discussion chapter the researcher gained a greater understanding of the reality of the experiences of adolescents whom she engages with.

The researcher is aware that prior to carrying out this study she had some preconceptions borne out of her experiences in working with teenagers for many years and indeed her own social media use. Some of these were proven correct and some not. The prominent assumption being that face-to-face conversation was considered richer than online contact. However for these adolescents it transpired that both forms of exchange possessed their own positive attributes and face-to-face was not necessarily the best one.

The study also allowed the researcher to enhance such skills as active listening and communication methods which will be of benefit in the role of guidance counsellor. It highlighted the importance of self-care in the context of the role of the guidance counsellor, and how resilience and coping strategies in high-touch work is imperative (Bimrose and Hearne 2012). In order for guidance counsellors to

effectively support students personal, emotional and social wellbeing the DES must support the wellbeing of school guidance counsellors, a concept emphasised by the IGC (2017). As a future guidance counsellor, the findings gave the researcher an awareness of the prevalence of social media use amongst teenagers. It highlighted the increased relevance that social media has on their everyday lives in and out of their school environment. It also provided an awareness of how interactions amongst students are constant which has both positive and negative attributes. The researcher was also conscious that as a guidance counsellor she must endeavour to make students aware that the role of the guidance counsellor encompasses a broad range of services which they can avail of throughout their post-primary schooling.

6.5 Conclusion

This chapter concludes the study on the relevance of social media platforms on adolescent friendships. It has presented a summary of the findings in the context of the aim and objectives of the study. Furthermore it discussed the strengths and limitations as observed by the researcher. It has suggested several recommendations and provided a summary of the personal learning undertaken by the researcher.

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Appendix A:



Subject Information Letter (Principal)

Date:

EHS REC no.:

Research title: An Exploration on the Role of Social Media Platforms on Friendship Formation in Adolescence.

Dear Principal,

I am a student of the MA in Guidance Counselling and Lifespan Development programme in the School of Education, University of Limerick, under the supervision of Dr. Lucy Hearne. I am undertaking a research dissertation on a topic related to guidance counselling as part of my studies.

In my research I aim to explore the role of social media platforms on friendship formation in adolescence. In order to gather this information I would appreciate if you would give me consent to carry out the research study in your school. This would involve me seeking participation from 20 students (10 from both second and fourth year) to take part in two focus groups. I will act as the moderator (data collector). Each focus group session will be audio-taped and take approximately one hour outside of class time. I also wish to conduct interviews with a small number of teachers in the school on their perceptions of the role of social media platforms on adolescent friendships. I am requesting your permission to seek volunteers for the interviews. I anticipate these interviews will last approximately forty-five minutes and will be held in a private location in the school, at the convenience of the participant.

All information gathered will be held in the strictest of confidence and pseudonyms will be used to ensure anonymity. Focus groups and interviews will be audio tape recorded and the data will be destroyed after analysis according to UL guidelines. Participation in the study is voluntary and participants can withdraw from the research at any time prior to data analysis phase. The results from this research study will be reported in my thesis and may be disseminated through other professional publications and conferences.

The collected data will be stored in a secure location approved by the University of Limerick. It is important to note that the school's name and the name of the individual participants will not be used in the research and the school will not be identifiable to anyone other than those directly involved.

If you have any queries or require further any further information on the research study, please contact me or my supervisor:

Researcher: Helen Pierce

Research Supervisor: Dr. Lucy Hearne

Telephone number: 00-353-61-20293

Email address: 9948562@studentmail.ul.ie Email address: lucy.hearne@ul.ie

This research has received Ethical approval from the Education and Health Sciences Research Ethics Committee (*need to insert EHSREC no. here when approved*). If you have any concerns about this study and wish to contact someone independent you may contact:

Chairman Education and Health Sciences Research Ethics Committee
EHS Faculty Office
University of Limerick
Tel (061) 234101
ehsresearchethics@ul.ie

Appendix B:



Subject Information Letter (Research Participant – Focus Group)

Date :

EHS REC no. :

Research title: An Exploration on the Role of Social Media Platforms on Friendship Formation in Adolescence.

Dear Student,

I am a student of the MA in Guidance Counselling and Lifespan Development programme in the School of Education, University of Limerick, under the supervision of Dr. Lucy Hearne. I am undertaking a research dissertation on a topic related to guidance counselling as part of my studies.

In my research I would like to find out more about the role of social media platforms in forming friendships for young people. In order to gather this information I would appreciate if you would agree to participate in an audio-taped focus group with a small number of students in your year group. The focus group will take approximately one hour and be held in the school at an agreed time.

As focus groups are conducted in a group setting, each participant's contributions will be heard by the other participants within the group. However, each student will be asked to sign an agreement to keep all opinions expressed during the focus group interview private. The recordings will have any names or identifiers removed, will be stored in a secure location in the University of Limerick, and the information will be stored for seven years. It will then be safely destroyed

All information gathered will be held in the strictest of confidence and pseudonyms will be used to ensure anonymity. The focus group will be audio tape recorded and the data will be destroyed after the analysis process. Participation in the study is voluntary and participants can withdraw from the research at any time prior to the data analysis phase. The results from this research study will be reported in my thesis and may be disseminated through other professional publications and conferences.

The collected data will be stored in a secure location approved by the University of Limerick. It is important to note that your name will not be used in the reporting of the research. If you have any queries or require further any further information on the research study, please contact me or my supervisor:

Researcher: Helen Pierce

Research Supervisor: Dr. Lucy Hearne

Telephone number: 00-353-61-20293

Email address: 9948562@studentmail.ul.ie Email address: lucy.hearne@ul.ie

This research has received Ethical approval from the Education and Health Sciences Research Ethics Committee (*need to insert EHSREC no. here when approved*). If you have any concerns about this study and wish to contact someone independent you may contact:

**Chairman Education and Health Sciences Research Ethics Committee
EHS Faculty Office
University of Limerick
Tel (061) 234101
ehsresearchethics@ul.ie**

Appendix C:



Subject Information Letter (Parent/ Carer/ Guardian)

Date:

EHS Rec. No:

Research Title: An Exploration on the Role of Social Media Platforms on Friendship Formation in Adolescence.

Dear Parent /Carer/ Guardian,

I am a student of the MA in Guidance Counselling and Lifespan Development programme in the School of Education, University of Limerick, under the supervision of Dr. Lucy Hearne. I am undertaking a research dissertation on a topic related to guidance counselling as part of my studies.

In my research, I aim to explore the role of social media platforms on the formation of friendships in adolescence. I am writing to you to enquire whether you would be willing to consent to your son/daughter taking part in this research study in the through a student focus group with me. The focus group will take approximately one hour and will be audio-taped. It should be noted that as focus groups are conducted within a group setting, each participant's contributions will be heard by the other participants within the group. However, each student will be asked to sign an agreement to keep all opinions expressed during the focus group interview private.

The recordings will have any names or identifiers removed, be stored in a secure location in University Limerick, and the information will be stored for seven years. It will then be safely destroyed.

Participation in the study is voluntary and students can withdraw from the research at any time prior to the data analysis phase. Should a student withdraw after the focus group has begun their contribution will be removed. If you have any queries or require any further information on the research study, please contact me or my supervisor:

Researcher: Helen Pierce

Research Supervisor: Dr. Lucy Hearne

Telephone number: 00-353-61-20293

Email address: 9948562@studentmail.ul.ie Email address: lucy.hearne@ul.ie

If you are agreeable to your son/daughter participating in this research study please confirm your consent by completing the attached **Consent Form and returning it to me by [insert date] at [School name]**. A signed copy of this form must be received in advance of the day of the focus group in order for your son/daughter to participate.

If you have any concerns about this study and wish to contact someone independent, you may contact:

Chairman Education and Health Sciences Research Ethics Committee
EHS Faculty Office
University of Limerick
Tel (061) 234101
ehsresearchethics@ul.ie

Appendix D:



Consent Form (Principal)

Date:

EHS REC no.

Research Title: An Exploration on the Role of Social Media Platforms on Friendship Formation in Adolescence.

I have read the project Information Sheet and understand in detail the particulars of the research project. I understand that the identity of the participants and the school will not be revealed in the reporting of this research study. The conditions involved in the research which are designed to protect the privacy of participants and respect their contribution are:

1. Participation is entirely voluntary.
2. Participants are free to withdraw at any time prior to the data analysis stage and any contribution made will be subsequently destroyed.
3. Both the interviews and the focus groups will be kept strictly confidential and will be available only to the researcher and the supervisor. Excerpts from the focus groups and interviews may be part of the final research dissertation but under no circumstances will names or any identifying characteristics be included in the report.

I hereby give my consent for *(insert your own name here)* to carry out this research in the school *(service/organisation)*:

Signature: _____

Printed name: _____

Signature of Researcher: _____

Date: _____

Appendix E:



Consent Form (Focus Groups)

Date:

EHS REC no.

Research Title: An Exploration on the Role of Social Media Platforms on Friendship Formation in Adolescence.

- I understand what this research project is about, and what the results will be used for.
- I am fully aware of the procedures and of the risks and the benefits of the study.
- I am fully aware that the recording of the focus group and the data generated from it will be kept confidential.
- I am aware that my identity will remain anonymous.
- I know that my participation in the research study is voluntary and I can withdraw my involvement at any time prior to the data analysis stage.

I hereby agree to take part in this study:

Signature: _____

Printed name: _____

Signature of Researcher: _____

Date: _____

Appendix F:



Consent Form (Parent or Carer or Guardian)

Date:

EHS Rec. No:

Research Title: An Exploration on the Role of Social Media Platforms on Friendship Formation in Adolescence.

I have read the Subject Information Letter and understand in detail the particulars of the research study. I understand that the following conditions are designed to protect the privacy of all participants and to respect their contributions.

- (i) Participation is entirely voluntary. Even if I consent to my child taking part, he/she still has the right to refuse to take part.
- (ii) All participants are free to withdraw at any time in the process prior to data analysis of the focus group.
- (iii) The focus group data will be kept strictly confidential and will be available only to the research team. Contributions during the focus group, however, will be heard by all other participants in the focus group.
- (iv) While excerpts from the focus group data may be made part of the final research report, under no circumstances will any names of students or the school, nor any identifying characteristics be included in this report.

I hereby consent to my son/daughter taking part in this research study in the form of a focus group.

Parent/Guardian Name:

.....

Students Name and School Year:.....

Parent/Guardian Signature:.....

Researcher's Signature.....Date:.....

Appendix G:



Confidentiality Agreement for Focus Group Participants

Date:

EHS Rec No:

Research Project Title: An Exploration on the Role of Social Media Platforms on Friendship Formation in Adolescence.

I agree to keep everything that is said in this group confidential.

That means that I can talk about anything that I say or the interviewer says outside of the group BUT I will not talk about anything that was said by any other students in my group.

I agree to keep other people's opinions and contributions to the group private. If I feel that this is something I cannot agree to, then I should reconsider my participation in the group and notify the researcher, Helen Pierce, that I will be no longer taking part.

I understand that I do not have to answer any questions that I don't feel comfortable answering and that I can decide at any stage that I don't want to take part anymore.

I agree ☐ I don't agree ☐

Participant Name:

Participant Signature:.....

Researcher's Signature.....

Date:.....

Appendix H:



Acceptance of the University of Limerick Child Protection Guidelines

I have read the University of Limerick Child Protection Guidelines and agree to abide by its contents. There is no reason why I would be considered unsuitable to work with children or young people.

Signature: _____ Date: _____

Print Name: _____

Department: _____

This form must be retained by the signatory's University Department

Appendix I:



Focus Group Guide:

Date:

EHS Rec No:

Research Project Title: An Exploration on the Role of Social Media Platforms on Friendship Formation in Adolescence

Welcome: The moderator will welcome participants and thank them for showing up.

Guidelines:

- The participants will be asked to sign a confidentiality agreement at the beginning of the session.
- Moderator will give instructions to the participants on how questions will be posed to them.
- The participants will be requested to raise their hand if they will to say something.
- The moderator will reinforce the issue of confidentiality surrounding this focus group session.
- The moderator will express that there are no right or wrong answers, only differing points of view.
- As the session is being recorded, participants will be requested to speak one at a time.
- It will be made explicit to the participants that they do not need to agree with others, but please listen respectfully as others share their views.
- The participants will be made aware that the role of moderator will be to guide the discussion.

Introduction Questions:

Please tell me about your use of social media platforms in your everyday life?
Which social media platforms do you use? / Do you have a favourite and why?
What do you mainly use them for?

Friendships and Their Online Formation:

What are your feelings on the differences between the friends you have online and offline?

Do you have many online friends? / Are they both male and female?

How do you meet new friends on these social media platforms?

Are there any positives about using social media platforms to make friends?

Are there any negatives about using social media platforms to make friends?
Would you consider all your social media contacts, friends?
Would you consider the friendships you have with girls online to be similar to the friendships you have with boys online?
What effect does your online activity have on your life in school?
If a problem arose about your friendships online is there anyone you believe you could discuss it with? Why?
Are you more comfortable chatting with your friends through social media or face-to-face? Why?
How does it feel when the social media interactions with your online friends finishes for the day?
Do you think these interactions have any effect on your confidence? / If so, how?

Permission/Safety:

How long are you allowed to spend online outside school hours? / Do you stick to this?
Is the time you spend online always on social media platforms? / How long would you spend on each of these sites per day?
Who do you share your personal information with outside of school hours?
Are you aware of safety concerns around chatting with people you do not know online?
Have you had internet safety talks in school? / If so, what do you need to think about now when using social media?
Is there anything else you wish to say on this topic?

Closing:

The moderator will thank all participants for their attendance and time.
The audio recording will be stopped.